

What Do You See?

July 10, 2022

Amos 7:7-17

⁷ This is what he showed me: the Lord was standing beside a wall built with a plumb line, with a plumb line in his hand. ⁸ And the LORD said to me, “Amos, what do you see?” And I said, “A plumb line.” Then the Lord said, “See, I am setting a plumb line in the midst of my people Israel; I will spare them no longer; ⁹ the high places of Isaac shall be made desolate, and the sanctuaries of Israel shall be laid waste, and I will rise against the house of Jeroboam with the sword.”

¹⁰ Then Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, sent to King Jeroboam of Israel, saying, “Amos has conspired against you in the very center of the house of Israel; the land is not able to bear all his words. ¹¹ For thus Amos has said, ‘Jeroboam shall die by the sword, and Israel must go into exile away from his land.’” ¹² And Amaziah said to Amos, “O seer, go, flee away to the land of Judah, earn your bread there, and prophesy there, ¹³ but never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king’s sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom.”

¹⁴ Then Amos answered Amaziah, “I am no prophet nor a prophet’s son, but I am a herdsman and a dresser of sycamore trees, ¹⁵ and the LORD took me from following the flock, and the LORD said to me, ‘Go, prophesy to my people Israel.’” ¹⁶ “Now therefore hear the word of the LORD. You say, ‘Do not prophesy against Israel, and do not preach against the house of Isaac.’” ¹⁷ Therefore thus says the LORD: Your wife shall become a prostitute in the city, and your sons and your daughters shall fall by the sword, and your land shall be parceled out by line; you yourself shall die in an unclean land, and Israel shall surely go into exile away from its land.”



Today we join Amos, one of the 12 minor prophets. Amos and the others are called ‘minor’ prophets because their books are shorter in length and their focus is on a fairly defined topic or situation. Amos came to propheteering later in life. His “regular” life was being a herdsman and a sycamore tree trimmer. He was used to working mostly by himself, along the margins of life. Last week Elisha called for us to learn obedience and to trust in what God can do. This week, Amos invites us to see and respond. As we prepare ourselves for today’s message, let us begin with a word of prayer...

Amos was from Tekoa, a small town about 10 miles south of Jerusalem. His call story was a bit unusual. For most prophets that was their primary call in life, to be a prophet. For Amos, it was a second career. Amos was active around 750 BC, during the point in history when there was a divided kingdom – Judah and Israel. Amos’ primary prophesy was to predict the downfall of Israel. The Assyrians would capture Israel in about 722 BC. Judah would also fall not too long after Israel fell.

For Amos, engaging in prophetic ministry of God was a rude awakening. In general, the task of a prophet was hard. God called men and women to go to the people or to those in power to tell them that they were sinning, that they were living in disobedience to God. As you could imagine, this was never well received. Never. We too have probably experienced this. Whether with our children or with a friend who has gone a bit astray, we have all attempted to offer advice or guidance that sought to bring someone back to how we thought they should live or to how we thought God thought they ought to live. The results are not always great, are they?

And we've all been told a number of things probably not best to repeat here. But we have also had experiences where our input was appreciated – hard to hear, perhaps, but appreciated in the end. To venture here, to offer words of truth, is risky, scary, potentially damaging.

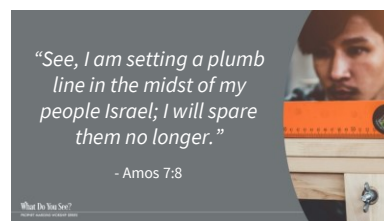
We do not come by these skills naturally. We must learn to offer advice or to intercede on behalf of a friend or loved one. When we are really small, as young children, we don't really play together at first. We play next to one another – almost like practicing how to play by watching one another and especially by watching older children. This process allows us to learn behaviors that help us to thrive in community – to play well with one another. It also teaches us which behaviors might get us excluded from community. As we all like to belong, we pay attention. As we grow older, this process continues. We all continue to evaluate our thoughts and actions by some external standard, often with belonging as our gauge. We encounter trouble or disorientation when our external standard clashes with our desired thoughts or behaviors.

Back in my previous life I was a teacher and coach who worked construction in the summer. A common practice, at least at the time, was to purchase materials for a job. In our small-scale operation, the owner would pay for said materials before we began the project. And then, when the job was done, excess would be returned to the lumber yard or wherever, creating a little extra profit. Even though sometimes it was just a board or two - \$10 or \$20, that practice ate at me. Finally, towards the end of the summer, I spoke up and said I could not be a part of that any longer. It could have been the end of that work relationship. I could have been dismissed and sent packing. But I knew it was wrong to do this, so I chose to speak up.

In the end, the practice was stopped. Returns were made and deducted from the final labor bill before it was submitted to the customer. I was glad that I had spoken up for what was right, even though it was a small thing.

Amos was called by God to the role of prophet. God's word began by speaking against the behavior of neighboring nations. Somewhat safe – maybe a 3 on a danger scale of 1 to 10. In Amos 1 and 2 he begins by naming the transgressions of neighboring groups – Damascus, Gaza, Tyre, Edom, Ammon, Moab. But then the focus turned to Israel and Judah, God's chosen people. Amos speaks primarily to Israel about their wickedness. He tells them that they are being obstinate because of their wealth and success. When we are wealthy and successful, it can be easy to become complacent or self-focused. They, of course, rejected these words of correction from God spoken by the prophet Amos. He was not very well liked, as you can imagine, pointing out the sin of the king, the priests, and the nation of Israel. After lamenting for the stubborn and disobedient hearts of God's own children, through Amos God pronounces punishment for their “complacent self-indulgence” – that's the title in my Bible for this section in chapter 6. Amos moves along the danger scale to a 10. This too is ignored by all – except by God.

At the start of chapter 7 God begins to birth an army of locusts that will bring devastation upon Israel. In one last attempt to get these hard hearts to turn, God decides to send Amos into the temple of a foreign god – into the House of Bethel – with a plumb line. In verse 8 we read, “*See, I am setting a plumb line in the midst of my people Israel; I will spare them no longer.*” God uses an amazing visual, a wonderful analogy.

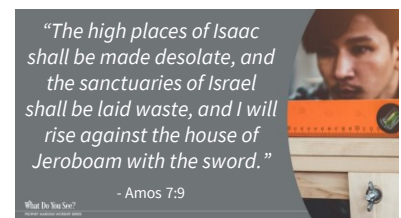


As gravity forces the plumb bob to point directly toward the center of the earth, it reveals what is truly vertical, or straight up and down in layman's terms. The plumb line gives an accurate standard against which to measure. It has fidelity when all else fails. It quickly reveals the difference between a best guess or good effort and what is true or perfectly aligned. Walls or buildings that may look well-built and straight will fail over time if they are not really built true. Amos understands that God is offering up this tool to "measure" the Israelites, to evaluate if they are staying true to God. In his role as prophet, it is Amos who will show the brokenness and evil that has become prevalent in Israel.

In the second part of this verse we can see that God is done. God sends this visible, tangible image to demonstrate to the people, to the priests, to the king, that things are off, that things are not square, that things are askew. Like with that shady business practice that I was a party to many years ago, Amos knew that things needed correction and realignment. Someone had to speak up if things were to be made right.

Reading on, in verse 9, we hear these words: *"The high places of Isaac shall be made desolate, and the sanctuaries of Israel shall be laid waste, and I will rise against the house*

of Jeroboam with the sword." There is impending doom. The downfall of Israel is nearly at hand. In response to these words, Amaziah, the priest in the House of Bethel, begins to spread rumors, to distort the message. King Jeroboam, Amos is speaking against you, against your leadership. As a priest, Amaziah knew that the idol worship was against God's ways. But he did not care.



Instead of pausing and asking himself, “What do you see?”, and honestly evaluating Amos’ words, he chooses to try to maintain the status quo, to perpetuate the wickedness and evil. To do so, he begins to spread rumors, trying to rile up



the king against Amos. The king was told that Amos was conspiring against him. That sounds much worse than speaking God’s word, than prophesying to the truths of God. And then he threatened Amos. We find this threat in verses 12 and 13: *“O seer, go, flee away to the land of Judah, earn your bread there, and prophesy there, but never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king’s sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom.”*

Amos is not deterred. He is not afraid. He does not flee after receiving these words of warning. Now, like many of us, Amos is aware of his own shortcomings. His pedigree is not that of “prophet”. That could lead some to dismiss or ignore him. Yet Amos is confident that he has been sent by God to speak words of truth to those living in sin. He was sure that God had set a plumb line against the house of Jeroboam and against the idol worship of the people, against their arrogance and selfishness that often comes with wealth and success. The plumb line revealed how crooked they all were. He knows that it is his role to call out those who have gone astray.

Undeterred, Amos speaks these words to Amaziah: *“Therefore thus says the LORD: Your wife shall become a prostitute in the city, and your sons and your daughters shall fall by the sword, and your land shall be parceled out by line; you yourself shall die in an unclean land, and Israel shall surely go into exile away from its land.”* Bam. Not only will God punish the leadership and the nation of Israel, but it will also impact Amaziah and his family.

Truth is truth – to blatantly disregard it and to dishonestly speak against it – there are consequences. For speaking against the word of God, judgment will fall heavily upon the house of Amaziah. Even though the “leader” insists that Amos is mistaken, that Amos is the one who ought to reconsider his stance, he stands faithfully and offers a simple truth, the plumb line revealing that it is Israel that is far from God’s truths.

The initial question for us is this: Are we willing to listen if God calls out to us living in small Piedmont or anyplace else in little old South Dakota and asks us to be God’s voice? And then, if we are willing to listen and respond to God’s call, are we bold enough to proclaim to a broken world that God has set a plumb line in our midst? Are we bold enough, as Amos was, to declare that God’s truths are the everlasting truths, the ones that do not shift or change? And if we are bold enough, are we willing to persist in speaking the truth when attacks come our way? When the Amaziah’s or Jeroboam’s of this world try to hush us up or try to make us reconsider our stance, will we be as brave and confident as Amos was? When speaking inconvenient truth, the powers of the world will tell us to go away, to speak somewhere else, to be quiet.

The reality is that up is up and down is down. Amos was not called to tell a convenient truth, but a difficult yet simple truth: If you desire God’s favor and presence, there are changes and sacrifices to be made. We too may be called to the same task, to telling God’s truths. So, are we willing to engage in prophetic work, even if that work is done from the margins? Are we willing to see the brokenness and evil and to bring God’s light upon that, asking those who are living askew or practicing evil, really, “What do you see?” Do you see the harm that is being done for your gain, the injustice that is being perpetuated for your benefit?

What if we flip the shoe to the other foot for a moment? When we walk astray of the Lord's will and ways, when we are walking outside of our faith, are we willing to hear the truth being spoken into our lives? Are we ourselves willing to pause and to see what that person is revealing? Are we willing to stop, to listen, and to ask ourselves, what do you see? Or do we just want that person to go away?

Friends, God chose a herdsman, a tree trimmer, to go into the places of power, to call for a return to right and holy living. You know, if God could use Amos, he could certainly use you and me. May we be willing as the Spirit leads. Amen and amen.

GPS – Grow, Pray, Study

- 1) *Grow*. When have you recently seen something that is wrong, unjust, unfair. How do you decide whether or not to say or do something? How does speaking up or doing something lead to growth in your faith?
- 2) *Pray*. Where in the world do you see a need for God to intervene, to speak truth to selfish or hard hearts? Take this need to the Lord in prayer.
- 3) *Study*. Read Amos 7:1-6. How do you see God's mercy and grace yet at work for Judah and Israel? How do you experience similar mercy and grace in your life?