

The Plumb Line

A Sermon by Rev. Katherine Schofield

Sunday, July 14, 2019

It was a time of great stability and prosperity -- for some. In the eighth century BCE the Kingdoms of Israel and Judah, though no longer unified, were also no longer in the midst of a civil war. Each nation had a pretty good King (each with a tenure of over 40 years which in those days was unusual and a sign of solid leadership). There had been no major threats to the small states from major Near Eastern powers such as Egypt or Assyria, and peace seems to have been accompanied by prosperity, at least for a privileged few and – according to the prophet Amos – at the expense of many.

Amos is the earliest prophet whose words are preserved in the form of a book. Though he hailed from the small Judean village of Tekoa, about 10 miles south of Jerusalem, he prophesied in the Northern Kingdom of Israel somewhere between the years 760-750 BCE. You may know Amos from such famous lines as “Let justice roll down like a river, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream!” He was an entirely different kind of prophet. As he himself expresses, he was not a professional prophet or a priest like Ezekiel and Isaiah. He was a herdsman and a dresser of sycamore trees. He was on the ground, in the field, and it was from this vantage point that he developed a God-given calling to speak out against injustice.

You see, with peace and prosperity came the emergence of an early form of agricultural feudalism. In Amos’ that time there was a big push among the elites to produce export crops and consolidate lands under a large centralized authority. Because of the increased push for production, many of the poorer farmers went into debt and became debt slaves to larger land owners. The elite got richer and the poor became their slaves. Amos prophesied against this economic system, arguing that the sinfulness of this kind of economic exploitation was on par with the war crimes committed by other nations. His preaching to Israel provided a powerful prophetic witness for all ages because of his condemnation of the spiritual blindness of the upperclass and their unjust exploitation of the poor.

And God gave Amos a series of visions. Visions that anyone, even a farmer in the fields, could understand. The one we read about today, was the third in a series. In the first two visions Amos sees images of destruction: locusts devouring the newly sprouted grass and a shower of fire consuming the land. In each case, Amos acts as intercessor and pleads with God to forgive Israel. Each time God relents and replies that the vision shall not come to pass. The third vision is of God standing beside a wall built with a plumb line, with a plumb line in his hand.

A plumb line. I’ve read this passage many times and have generally just written off a plumb line as some kind of measuring tool having to do with construction of a wall. Like, a fancy measuring tape, or an early form of one of those architects triangles. But this time around I did a little digging and here’s what I found.

This is a plumb line – a very simple thing. A string with a weight at the end of it. Used in construction of walls to make sure that everything is vertically aligned. And so when God stands with a plumb line in His hand the image conveys God’s evaluation of the actions of Israel. God is looking to see if everything is on the up and up, if the people’s behavior is upright – but he finds that things are off kilter. This society that’s being built up is crooked – top heavy – it won’t bear the weight – and, as God makes clear – it won’t stand for long.

God establishes a plumb line in the midst of the people, a guiding tool to help us know if we are in line with God’s will, if we are living an upright life. We sometimes talk about being reconciled with God – which means

more than improving your relationship with God, although that's part of it. In reconciling with God we're trying to get in line with God's will for our lives, with the plumb line. I kind of like to visualize it like getting your chakras aligned. But basically it's about getting in tune vertically and aligning yourself with God's will for your life.

A plumb line is a very simple thing. It doesn't cost anything. It requires very little – a string, and a weight. I made this one from stuff I found around the church. And it can go anywhere – you don't have to use it in the temple – you can use it in the field, in work, at school, on the tallest mountains, in the deepest valleys.

A plumb line depends on the force of gravity to work. It only keeps things straight because the weight is pulled down by gravity, a force we cannot see. Gravity is something that Amos probably couldn't even have conceived of. But millennia before Newton, and before Amos, God the creator somehow worked out that we'd need this force of gravity to make the whole creation experiment tick. None of us could've come up with it, with our narrow scope. We can't have a full understanding of the laws of nature and physics from where we stand. But God, is big enough to conceive it. That's why we rely on God's guidance, because God's got the whole picture. God sees the full scope.

When we rely only on our own understanding to guide our lives, when we can't look beyond our own feet, and seek only the best solution in the moment, often we miss the bigger picture. The lives we build start to list. In today's world of instant gratification and disposable happiness if what we pursue is simply what brings us the most joy – this joy becomes hollow and cannot stand the test of time. If what we seek is popularity or power or success (whatever that means) only for ourselves, that power or success becomes meaningless. But God has set a plumb line amidst the people – it is a plumb line of love, of celebrating the blessedness in all of creation, of justice for all people, of building up one another and the rest of God's good creation.

That's right – the plumb line is not just a tool to evaluate and determine what needs to be torn down – it's also a tool for building up. And when we build – build ourselves up, build up one another, build up our community – in accordance with the plumb line – with the pursuit of justice for all people, with a spirit of love and compassion, with an understanding of humility and God's guidance – then we know that what we build will be strong and sure and stand the test of time. Wherever you stand, however heavy the weight you carry, whatever chaos swirls around you, God's guidance is always available to you, for God has set a plumb line in the midst of the people.