Springfield Presbyterian Church

July 14th, 2024

A Plumb Line

1. Intro

As we hear the text from Amos this morning, it is important to

give you some context here. We do not often speak about Amos, but his prophetic acts are still a catalyst for our own actions today. So, Amos was a native of the Northern Kingdom and he was a common man – a herder and a farmer. He held no particular special position in his community, and it seems like he was part of the lower to middle-class of his community.

Yet, he also is a man who sees visions from God and he feels compelled to proclaim them. Like many prophets and all who speak the truth in difficult situations – we can sense he doesn’t want to – it does not bring him joy. The role of a prophet at this time is to remind the king that his sovereignty is not unlimited and that God’s justice is greater than the king’s justice. It is an important role, it is a necessary role, but anyone with a sound mind for peace and a desire for an easy life would not want to be a prophet. Yet, a prophet does not choose this for themselves – a prophet is given a responsibility to speak God’s Word in their context. They are a vessel for God’s justice, love, and mercy exhibited in human form.

So, you have Amos who is having visions and he’s struggling with what he sees around him. Though the Kingdom looks like it’s fairly peaceable, there is a greater issue at hand. The richer are becoming richer and the poorer are becoming poorer. Those in power are manipulating people with debt, and the debt just gets greater and greater and there’s no way to swim upstream.

1. Our lives

What strikes me here is that it still feels like we need an Amos

among us, or maybe a few Amos like people to speak the truth to power. We are watching the richer get richer and the poorer get poorer through the same methodology – but perhaps just more refined. We watch this in the health care system, and as an aside, I am very, very grateful for the incredible medicinal and treatment advances that we have seen in our lives. And yet, when you look through the itemized costs of a hospital bill, there are things that just don’t add up. One recent report showed that a bandaid that you could get down at the pharmacy for $4 (and granted that’s a box of twenty bandaids) – costs around $600 dollars for one in a hospital setting. Now, I understand there are staff and supply fees, but $600 seems steep to me.

You could also look at the gender gap. Currently, as of this past week, reports show that women generally earn 84% of what a man makes, even with the same education and years of employment. A woman can be the breadwinner in a family, but she’s already up against this gap that can be hard to bridge.

Now, I could tell you several other ways in which the gap between the rich and poor continues to grow – but you read the paper and you see the news. We know that the values of the world are inconsistent with the values of the Gospel. Amos, in his own context saw the same, and so, he speaks about the plumb line.

1. The plumb line

A plumb line is used to ensure that you have a straight line.

It’s a simple system – imagine a weight or a marble held by a string. Once that string stops swinging, the weight adds the tension so the string becomes a perfect straight line. During the time of Amos, they would have used a plumb line to set up the temple or any structure around town.

Amos here uses the plumb line as a metaphor, but one that his surrounding company can understand. He’s telling them – you’re not plumb. You are not in line with God’s law – Israel’s religious and political structures do not measure up. Amos is speaking truth to significant power.

And, they are, unsurprisingly, not super pleased. Amaziah, who works on behalf of the king, tells him to go away, to never come back again – go flee to the land of Judah and prophecy over there. What is kind of illuminating here is that for Amos, this is about God and God’s law, yet Amaziah doesn’t speak once about God. He has lost sight of the law of God – and it sounds like the community at large has as well. Despite Amaziah’s hostile response, Amos tells him – I’m not a prophet, but God told me to prophecy – in other words, this is not what I originally signed up for, but here I am.

1. Others who spoke truth to power

I give Amos so much respect for standing up to a kingdom like

That – he knew he could be killed, but the message had to stand. He could not stay silent. As I think of him, I naturally think of two other somewhat contemporary people who did the same.

Some of you may have heard of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. If you haven’t, there’s some fantastic documentaries out there about him. In short, during the time of Nazi Germany, he protected those in danger and was eventually arrested because Hitler and his men saw that he was part of the plot to assassinate Hitler. It gets theologically complicated, because Bonhoeffer was a pacifist, but also saw that Hitler’s reign would cause more death. Yet, Hitler did not die at that time and soon after the assassination attempt, Dietrich would be executed. Bonhoeffer sought to speak truth to power in a variety of ways, from speaking with other pastors, to speaking with those in the government, and protecting those he could from the camps. It’s important to remember that Germany is tied to the Lutheran church, it is a state entity – and as a Lutheran pastor, he sought to show that the religion that Germany proclaimed as their state religion was not being followed. Nazi Germany was nowhere near the plumb line.

In our own country, we can remember the legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, who called the United States to live up to the promissory note that it signed in its constitution. He was a modern prophet, who spoke truth to power to people who did not want to hear it. He pointed to the values of freedom and equality that the country proclaimed, yet did not hold visibly true. His legacy helped us to see in profound actions and words that our nation was also nowhere near the plumb line.

1. Who is the Plumb Line

Now, we could say – how do we judge the plumb line

Anymore, right? This is an ancient measure that cannot necessarily be used. We do not use the phrase, ‘the law of God’ anywhere in our modern vernacular, so how do we see it in the here and now?

We see the plumb line in Christ. Christ is the incarnation, the mirror, the reflection of what God’s law looks like in life. I love how Francis of Assisi’ soulmate Clare put it, as she said, “Christ is a mirror in which we can gaze on our true selves, so that we can see clearly those aspects of our lives that are out of plumb and repent of them, while seeing the true angel and dimension to which we are called.”

This is significant. As we reflect upon the prophets of old as well as contemporary times, and as we hold Christ’s ministry in mind, the plumb line becomes clearer. It reminds me of when I was a kid, and the fashion amongst some Christians was wearing that ‘WWJD’ bracelet – What Would Jesus Do? I’m not seeking to revive that trend, but perhaps that’s the phrase that needs to be embedded on our hearts again. In our actions, are we doing what Jesus would do? In our words, are we speaking the words that Jesus would in his own life? As we gaze upon our past, we can see if we’ve hit the plumb line, and as we look at our present, we can seek to readjust. And hopefully, in carrying that attitude into the future, we will be hitting the plumb line more closely.

So, as you go from this place, take the work of the prophets and ponder them. How did they convey God’s message and what was the plumb line for each that did not measure up? Consider the life of Christ and how He sought to make the plumb line clearer for us by joining us in our own humanity. And as you live your life, today, tomorrow, and beyond – continue to gaze in the mirror and seek to follow the plumb, as we grow closer day by day in being aligned with the ministry of Christ in this time and place. Alleluia and amen.