

“DON’T SHOOT THE MESSENGER!”

Amos 7:7-17

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It wasn't that long ago that I had my car in the shop when the mechanic pointed out that my tires were not wearing evenly. He suggested I have the alignment checked. I really didn't want to hear that, knowing that an alignment is not cheap. But he was right. After hitting chuck holes and driving over rough roads, my car needed attention. It was worth it to have the wheels aligned in order to keep the tires from wearing out prematurely. Having your car in proper alignment also makes for a smoother and safer ride.

This morning I am holding in my hand a plumb line. It is a mechanical device used in construction. It is basically a string with a weight at the bottom that helps architects and builders determine whether or not their buildings are straight. If you are a bricklayer, for example, you want to know as soon as possible if your wall is straight or crooked, whether you will have to rebuild it or not. You certainly want to know before the cement dries!

In this morning's Lectionary reading from the Old Testament, Amos walks into the King's palace and pulls a plumb line out of his pocket and says, "The Lord is standing in our midst. Just as this plumb line shows whether or not our buildings are solid and of good construction, so the Lord is judging Israel. Things are not in order in this kingdom. In fact, the government is corrupt, rotten to the core! Your administration is not in alignment with the tenets of your faith and with the moral laws of the universe that God established. This plumb line is a symbol of what is wrong in the country!"

Needless to say, the king is appalled by what Amos has to say. The networks interrupt their regular programming to go live and direct to the Capital, where the television cameras are swarming like flies. Wolf Blitzer gears up in the Situation Room. CNN is all over the story. Reporters are everywhere.

In a prepared statement, a top government official appears on nationwide television and politely tells Amos to pack his bags and go elsewhere to make his speeches and write his books. The priest Amaziah literally says, "*Go to the land of Judah (another country in the Near East), 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 7:12-13)

Suddenly Amos is confronted with a choice, the biggest decision of his life. Will he go away quietly and peacefully, or will he continue to preach the message he believes with all his heart that God is calling him to share? Someone once said, "There's truth and there's politics." Will Amos listen to reason and back off and save his skin, or will he continue to share his controversial message and risk his reputation, his career and possibly his life?

In order to grasp the decision facing Amos, we need to understand who Amos is. Amos is standing in the tradition of the Old Testament prophets. We of the Judeo-Christian tradition believe

that in every generation God is active and speaks to those who will listen. God's voice comes with unusual clarity to some: Moses at the burning bush, Elijah at Mt. Moriah, Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration, Paul on the Damascus road, to name a few.

A prophet is not one who chooses this profession, but rather is someone chosen by God to speak God's word of truth to the people. Usually it is an "inconvenient truth." Often prophets speak words folks do not want to hear. They often share messages which are depressing, discouraging, and unpleasant. They major in "tough love." Prophets, you understand, are not fortune tellers who sit with a crystal ball and tell us what is going to happen. Rather they read the signs of the times and tell us what is wrong with our world and with our lives, and what will happen if present trends continue. They remind us that there are consequences to our actions that cannot be avoided or escaped.

Someone has said that prophets are "party poopers." They rain on our parades. They frequently tell us what we don't want to hear, and so like King Jeroboam, we sometimes tell them to go away, or we avoid dealing with them if we can.

I know a woman, sadly, who ignored a breast lump for nearly ten years. By the time she came to terms with her condition it was too late. The doctor will tell me that I need to lose weight and that I need to get more exercise, so I'll just cancel my appointment. I really don't want to hear that again. Preach somewhere else, Amos! Stand on another street corner! Find another pulpit. Your message doesn't please us! Go spread your gloom and doom somewhere else!

You will remember that John Wesley, who was an ordained priest in the Church of England, had an evangelical conversion experience that caused him to approach life with passion and with zeal. Not content to do the same old thing in the same old way, John Wesley's sermons challenged the establishment and were responsible for dramatic changes in the lives of many of his listeners. After preaching in many of the pulpits of his day, time after time he was told that he was not welcome to preach in that church again! The other priests did not want to hear what Wesley had to say. His message hit too close to home, you see.

Well, Amos was told to stop. I'm sure he thought about it. I'm sure he prayed about it. But Amos felt that he was called by God to prophesy to the people of Israel, whether the king was open to receiving his message and heeding his words or not. So Amos continued on, boldly speaking for God and for the values and tenets of the faith. "*Let justice roll down like waters,*" he said in one of his most famous sermons, "*And righteousness like an everflowing stream.*" (5:24)

Now imagine Amos walking into Washington, D.C., today and letting down his plumb line in our nation's capital. Would he find that all is well, or would he find a problem with the alignment of some of our current government practices and the ideals and values of our land? Would he be critical of politicians on both sides of the aisle? I believe he would. If Amos came to Cleveland, what would he say about the stories we read and hear day after day about the corruption in our city and county government? How would the administration of our programs that are designed to help people measure up if Amos brought his plumb line to our City Hall?

Well, it's easy to see the analogy, but we need to remember that most of Amos' prophesy was directed toward the religious leaders of his day. Amos was bothered by the hypocrisy of the priests and their willingness to remain silent in the face of widespread corruption. He was upset that the religious establishment said nothing to a government that protected the rich and exploited the poor. We can point a finger at the secular institutions of our day and the greed and corruption that seems to be so pervasive, but Amos encourages us to search our hearts, lest we miss the point of his tirade.

Most of us could articulate, without too much problem, the ideals we believe in and the goals that we have for ourselves, both short-term and long range. But are our actions in alignment with our goals? As a congregation, we say that passionate worship is our goal. Yet on any given Sunday,

hundreds of our members are not in attendance at any of our worship services. It's hard to be passionate about worship when you're not even here! We talk about vital Christian education, and as part of the church started by John Wesley, we believe in lifelong learning. Yet how many of us are involved in a Bible study, a Sunday school class or a spiritual growth group? We are as a congregation, committed to risk-taking mission and service. Yet for some of us, the last time we participated in a mission project or hands-on service was a long time ago, and to be honest, we can't remember the last time we took a genuine risk. Many of us have not stuck our necks out and committed ourselves to wholehearted mission and service in a long time. We pride ourselves on being a friendly church, but we must continually reach out to others, or we will quickly become a closed and dying fellowship.

Are these harsh words? I hope not. But I remind you that one of the roles of an ordained pastor is to study God's Word and to interpret it to the congregation, and I hear God speaking through Amos and being very critical of our complacency and our lack of initiative. I believe that God continues to ask, **"What have you done with what you have been given?"** When we honestly face that question, I believe that most of us, probably all of us, come up short.

Now it is not my job to judge you. In fact, it is not my job to judge anyone. That job is God's alone. But it is my job to remind you of the inconvenient truth that our actions have consequences, and that from Genesis to Revelation the Bible tells us that God will expect an accounting for what we have been given. To me, God's judgment means that the God whom we have refused to love refuses not to be loved by us. God keeps after us, reminding us that we are called to bigger and better things. God will not be satisfied with a half-hearted or mediocre response. Instead, God keeps pushing us, prodding us, until our whole lives are devoted to God.

Jeroboam and Amaziah dealt with Amos by telling him to get out of town. Now we don't have to listen to the message of Amos! (Those of you who are listening on the radio can simply turn it off!) Those who are in the congregation can daydream and think about other things. Throughout history people have dealt with news they didn't want to hear by shooting the messenger. We can ignore the message, but God's truth prevails. The plumb line tells the story. Are we in alignment or not?

A seminary professor of mine once told the class, "As Christians, we need to listen attentively. We need to pray that we will be able to discern God's voice among the many voices we hear around us. We must listen attentively," he repeated, "For **we do not know through whom God will choose to speak.**" Through whom is God speaking today? Are we listening for God's voice?

May each of us be open to hearing God's Word. Let us not **shoot the messenger**. Rather, let us listen for what God is saying to us today.

Prayer: Dear God, just as Amos of old had the courage to challenge the leaders of his day and call them to accountability, so give us the courage to speak up and speak out with what we believe you would have us to say today. Help us also hold the plumb line to our own hearts and lives, that we might see where we fall short. Then help us to seek your forgiveness and get our lives in alignment with your Word. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.