

Plumb and Square

In the name of Jesus, dear friends in Christ: “What do you see?” the Lord asked the prophet Amos. “A plumb line” he replied. A plumb line: a very simple yet extremely accurate instrument. It hangs straight revealing the true vertical so that other things can be compared to it and so adjusted that they too are aligned to true vertical. And though it may get bumped by something or blown by the wind so that it swings a bit, it always comes back to true vertical. It does this because it’s anchored from above and the inexorable Law of Gravity – the force that binds us all to the earth – causes it to point directly straight down.

But why did the Lord show Amos a plumb line? What’s the message? It’s this: the Lord has set up a plumb line; it’s his perfect, holy, unbending, unyielding, and unchangeable Law. It’s the absolute standard by which all human behavior – all our thoughts, our words, and our actions—or our lack of action – is judged. And though we try to disturb it, pushing it this way or that with our philosophical arguments, our special circumstances and considerations, and our alibis and excuses, it always comes back to true vertical showing that when we sin in any way or for any reason, we’re out of line. It can do this because it’s not anchored here on earth where things are constantly changing and subject to corruption; but rather it is anchored from above, in God himself, who is forever perfectly just, righteous, and unchanging.

The Lord called Amos to take that plumb line and go to the Northern Kingdom of Israel and hold it up to what was going on there. “Hold it up to king and to his government. Hold it up to the behavior of the people and the way they’re living their lives. Hold it up to the religious leaders, the things they’re teaching the people, and to their worship. And then pronounce my judgment. Tell them they’re out of alignment. Tell them they’re leaning over so far they’re about to fall. Tell them to repent and to return to my absolute standard of right and wrong before it’s too late.” And so that’s what Amos did.

He went as directed to the Kingdom of Israel, to its religious center in the city of Bethel. And holding up the Lord’s plumb line he saw an awful lot that was out of alignment, just like the Lord had said. Times were good. The economy was booming and in general the nation was quite prosperous; maybe too prosperous because it gave people with means the opportunity to indulge all their worst vices. They over ate, they over drank, they lavished fortunes on fancy clothes, jewelry, cosmetics, and perfumes. And they enjoyed their entertainments. They were living the good life. Meanwhile the poor were being oppressed. Widows and orphans were being neglected. Some were starving. The judges and magistrates, the very people who should have been protecting the poor, were corrupt and their decisions could be bought for a price. The corruption went all the way to the top, to the king and his cronies who were filling their pockets with dirty money. Worse still was the religious life of the nation. The priests were freely mixing pagan elements into their teachings and their worship. They set up idols to represent the Lord God of Israel (and believe it or not, idols representing his wives and girlfriends as well), and they encouraged such practices as cultic prostitution and infant sacrifice – things they’d borrowed from the Canaanites and their false religions. *They called* what they were doing the worship of the one true God; but it was anything but that.

Amos saw all of this going on, and so he went right into their unholy temple and declared God’s judgment in the hearing of all: “Unless you repent and return to the Lord God, to him

alone and to his ways, this land will be laid waste, your temples and high places will be destroyed, and you and your king will go into captivity.”

The high priest and chief prophet of the Northern Kingdom was a fellow named Amaziah. He had a good thing going, and he didn't want anyone messing it up. After all, his job was easy, he was popular with the people, and he was one of the rich. And the people were quite content mixing all those pagan elements into their faith. So he immediately sent word to the king that there was an outsider stirring up a rebellion. He accused Amos of high treason for speaking against the king, apparently with the hope that Amos would be arrested and executed. And while he waited to hear from back from the king, he told Amos that he'd better run for his life. “We don't need your type around here. Go back where you came from and try to earn your living as a prophet there. But never again speak your depressing words of judgment around here. We don't want to hear it.”

And we heard Amos' reply. “I'm not a professional prophet. And I'm not getting paid for this. I'm a shepherd and I take care of a fig orchard. But the Lord sent me here with a message, and I'm delivering it. You can't say that you haven't been warned.” Actually, we only heard part of Amos' reply. You see, Amaziah had prophesied continued peace and prosperity for the nation of Israel. He interpreted the good times they were enjoying as proof of the Lord's favor. So Amos said to Amaziah, “You don't want me prophesying against this nation? Okay, I'll give you a personal prophecy instead: When the Lord's judgment falls, your sons and daughters will be killed before your eyes, your wife will become a prostitute, and you will die in an unclean, foreign land.” Harsh words indeed; but within two years the prophecy of Amos was the one that proved to be correct. The Northern Kingdom of Israel was wiped off the map by the armies of Assyria. Its people (the survivors of the bloodbath, anyway) were taken into captivity and sold as slaves. It happened because they refused to hear God's word of warning. They didn't want to compare themselves to the perfect plumb line Amos held up before them, and consequently they failed to repent and return to the Lord.

John the Baptizer saw the plumb line too. He used it in his day to reveal the sins of the people and call them to repentance. All people: from tax collectors and prostitutes, to the soldiers, farmers, and business people, to the priests, scribes, and religious leaders, all the way up to the king himself; John held up the plumb line before them and called them all to repent of their sins because the judgment of the Lord was at hand.

And we heard what happened. King Herod didn't like it when John accused him of living in adultery because he had ditched his first wife and run off and married the younger and prettier wife of his brother Philip – a woman named Herodias, who just happened to be his niece also, the daughter of yet another brother. I guess you'd call it a family affair. (And those of you from Missouri can relax: I'm going to resist the temptation to make a wisecrack about how this sort of convoluted relationship is common there.) But make no mistake, Herod knew that what he was doing was wrong; he just didn't like having it pointed out before the whole world. It's strange: he didn't mind sinning before the whole world; but to have someone say it was a sin, *that's* what was unacceptable. So he put John in prison to silence him, publicly at least. Privately he still liked listening to John preach, so he'd pull him up out of the dungeon now and then to hear another scathing sermon directed against him. Herod knew the truth when he heard it, and he regarded John to be a prophet of God – even admired him for his courage; but he himself was weak. He enjoyed the pleasures of sin more than he feared God, so he refused to repent. He was willing to listen to what was right; just not willing to do it.

That wasn't good enough for Herodias, though. She didn't even want to hear what was right. She didn't care what God thought about her sin. She wanted the Baptizer dead. And in the end, she got Herod to do it for her. He should have known better. When you are morally compromised, doing what you know to be wrong, refusing to repent and trying to silence the word of God, it's only a matter of time before you get around to shooting the messenger.

Now let me give you a contemporary example, one that's close to home. I was a little reluctant to mention this; but the fact is that it needs to be said, and these texts before us open the door for it. Here it is: most of you know that our friends over at St. John in Clarinda are going through a difficult time. The reason for this is that for many years they've practiced a form of open communion which is not consistent with the theology and practice of the Lutheran Church. Their present pastor is working to fix things and bring them back in line. And right now he's meeting a lot of resistance. But I have to hand it to him: for the better part of three years he's very patiently taught them how things are supposed to be and why they're supposed to be that way. And everything was fine as long as all he did was talk about it. But then came the day last fall when he said it's time to stop talking and actually do it. And suddenly in the minds of many he's become an evil tyrant and a heartless dictator. Some are demanding that he leave. Others are avoiding worship or they're withholding their offerings. "He's destroying our church" people have complained to me. They soon discover they're complaining to the wrong guy because what he's doing is right. It's the same thing I would have done; and I don't think I could have been as patient about it. It's not honest to say you're an LCMS church and then violate the rules we've all promised to live by. What's more, a Lutheran pastor takes a solemn oath to uphold Lutheran doctrine and enforce Lutheran practice. He makes this promise to God and to the congregation he serves. If he does anything less, he's lying to God and being unfaithful to his people. And he's violating his own conscience, which is never a safe thing to do. Now, I'm not saying that everything the pastor has said and done during this process has been perfect. Pastors are sinners too and they make mistakes. But the truth is that no matter what he said or did during this transition, some folks were going to be offended and angry. That's what happens when you try to be faithful to God's Word.

And part of the reason that I'm using this example is because I know many of you have friends and family who are members of St. John. They need our prayers and support at this critical time. And we need to help them by encouraging them to do what's right, which is almost never what's easy or avoids all conflict. Because we are all sinners, none of us really likes being compared to the plumb line of God.

But we need to do that. We need to hold it up and compare it to our nation, to the norms of our society, to our cultural values, and to the laws of our land. We need to hold it up to the entertainments with which we amuse ourselves; to the movies and shows we watch, the music we listen to, the books we read, and to the sites we visit on the internet. We need to hold it up to this church, to our doctrine and practice, and to the way we treat each other as members of the body of Christ. Most importantly of all, we need to hold it up to ourselves. We need to test our own thoughts, words, and actions by comparing them to God's perfect standard of what is plumb and square.

There is an absolute moral standard. There is absolute truth. And we don't get to decide what it is; it comes down from God above. And it states emphatically *this* is wrong and *this* is right. The first question is: do you believe that? You see, our culture has long since moved away from that idea into moral relativism, where there is no black and white and everything is shades of gray. And as citizens of this world, it's easy to get caught up in the flow of the culture. I read this last week that the National Association of Evangelicals, a fairly

conservative religious organization, is now recommending that Christian singles be encouraged to use contraceptives. Why? Because the assumption is that practically no one is chaste anymore. Sex is what singles do together. It doesn't make any difference that the Lord intends sex for marriage; no one is listening to him. We need to get real.

And listen, we've all been affected by this. It's like we're all so used to leaning in the direction of our culture, that we don't notice that we're not standing up straight. We decry the fact that our state now allows gay marriage – which is a ridiculous oxymoron – but it couldn't have happened if we had not first abandoned the idea of the sanctity of marriage. So many of us have bought into the ideas of easy, no-fault divorce, so called casual sex while dating, and couples shacking up outside of marriage. And it's not just in these things that pertain to the Sixth Commandment. We all agree that it's wrong to steal; but we're willing to be less than honest when filing tax returns or making insurance claims. All of us would agree it's wrong to murder; but in the case of certain abortions, say when there's rape or incest involved, or when the child is going to be severely handicapped ... in such cases it's easy to fall into the trap of seeing gray where God's Word is black and white. It happens especially when any of these cases involve you personally or your friends and family members. That's when we start looking for exceptions and loopholes. There aren't any. About all these things and many more I could name, God's Word is perfectly clear. We need to stop disturbing the plumb line and see where we really stand with respect to it.

But that brings us to the second question. Once you realize you're leaning over and about to fall, what do you do about it? More to the point, when the Lord in his mercy sends you a faithful witness, an Amos or a John to show you that you're out of alignment (because sometimes our own perspective and ability to evaluate ourselves is out of whack), what do you do then? Will you be like Herod who was willing to listen; but unwilling to do anything about it? Will you be like Herodias who decided to shoot the messenger? Will you be like Amaziah, who threatened and accused the messenger?

Or will you do what the Lord wants? What's that? Simple: he wants you to repent. He wants you to admit your guilt. He wants you to rightly fear his wrath and judgment. He wants you to do this so that you will see you stand before him condemned and in danger of eternal hellfire. Because then he can point you to Jesus, his Son, who on the cross gave his life as the atoning sacrifice for your sins. The Lord gives us his plumb line so that we will see that on our own we are destined to fall. Then he can show us the One who lived a life perfectly plumb and square for us – and in whose righteousness we stand upright before the Lord. The Law of God can't fix us; but it's the first necessary step in showing us the One who does, so that we will place our trust in him and the mighty work he did to save us.

And this is why it's absolutely vital that we not attempt to tamper with the plumb line of God's Law; but rather to hold it up at all times before ourselves and before others to help them; because then we will all see more clearly and trust more thoroughly in our Savior Jesus Christ. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!