

I took a quick look back at my sermons over the last two and a half years while I was working on this message this week and I saw that I have mentioned the prophet Amos several times during my tenure here. I suspect it's worthwhile, though, to spend a little time refreshing our memories about the time and situation he was addressing in his prophecies before we get to the meat of the matter this morning. I think it will be especially helpful in our understanding of why we should pay attention to Amos' story today. There are many parallels between his time and ours. Amos speaks to us across the centuries because the people he spoke to then are so very much like much of America today.

Amos was probably the earliest of the writing prophets inspired by God to instruct God's people. He preached in Israel during the reign of King Jeroboam II, sometime between 786 and 746 BCE. The great united kingdom of David and Solomon had been split into two, Israel in the north and Judah in the south, by Jeroboam's namesake some 150 years earlier. The two tiny kingdoms were always at risk of being overrun by their much larger neighbors – Egypt to the southwest, Assyria beyond the buffer state of Aram to the north and Babylon beyond Arabia to the east. All three great powers, however, were weak at the time of Jeroboam II and Amos, allowing Israel to expand and take Damascus from Aram and to become a hub of international trade. Because of this time of relative peace and good business, Israel had become prosperous.

The country's prosperity, however, was not universally enjoyed. Both Amos and his near contemporary, Hosea, tell of a terrible economic disparity as the wealthy took advantage of the poor to become wealthier still, while the poor were left more destitute than ever. In the second chapter of Amos, we find the primary charges of Yahweh against the people of the Northern Kingdom: Thus says the LORD:

For three transgressions of Israel,
and for four, I will not revoke the punishment;
because they sell the righteous for silver,
and the needy for a pair of sandals—
they who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth,
and push the afflicted out of the way;
father and son go in to the same girl,
so that my holy name is profaned;
they lay themselves down beside every altar
on garments taken in pledge;
and in the house of their God they drink
wine bought with fines they imposed.

These charges of failing to protect the poor and vulnerable, indeed of taking advantage of them, are repeated several times in the book. Chapter 3, verse 10: "They do not know how to do right," says the LORD, those who store up violence and robbery in their strongholds." Chapter 4, verses 1 & 2: "Hear this word, you cows of Bashan

who are on Mount Samaria,
who oppress the poor, who crush the needy,
who say to their husbands, 'Bring something to drink!'

The Lord GOD has sworn by his holiness:

The time is surely coming upon you,

when they shall take you away with hooks,
even the last of you with fish-hooks.”

Chapter 5, verses 10-11: “They hate the one who reproves in the gate,
and they abhor the one who speaks the truth.

Therefore, because you trample on the poor
and take from them levies of grain,
you have built houses of hewn stone,
but you shall not live in them;
you have planted pleasant vineyards,
but you shall not drink their wine.”

The people of Israel were no doubt shocked to hear these sorts of denunciations coming in the name of Yahweh, particularly since they were being spoken at Bethel, one of the great holy places of Yahweh in their land. Bethel, you may recall, was the place where Jacob saw the angels coming up and down on a ladder to heaven. He was so moved that he named the place “the House of God” (Beth-El). Following the division of the kingdom, Bethel became the major center for worship in the Northern Kingdom. Of course, there were some differences in the way Yahweh was worshipped at Bethel as opposed to Jerusalem. The first King Jeroboam, in setting up the temple at Bethel (along with another further north at Dan) had made two golden calves to be the center of worship for these temples. In repeating the sin of Aaron, who made the golden calf for the people to worship while Moses was receiving the commandments on Mt. Sinai, Jeroboam was, in essence, attempting to reduce Yahweh from an invisible and omnipresent God, the one true Deity, to another tribal idol, portable, easily controlled, the servant of the people and the kingdom rather than the ultimate ruler of both. It must have been hard to hear that such an obviously compliant godling might judge the people harshly, especially during such good times.

Into this selfish and complacent land, Amos comes with his very unexpected message. The vision of the plumb line is one of four in the latter chapters of the book. Amos compares the nation of Israel to a wall, inspected by its builder. The great English commentator of the early 18th Century, Matthew Henry, writes, “God now *stands upon* this wall, not to hold it up, but to tread it down, or, rather, to consider what he should do with it. He *stands upon it with a plumb-line in his hand*, to take measure of it, that it may (be seen) to be a bowing, bulging wall.” God is judging Israel by the same measure with which the nation was founded at Sinai, by God’s own holy commandments. Rather than standing straight and true, in compliance with the ever-straight plumb line, the nation bows and bulges, tilting first this way from the plumb then the other. It’s a mess, fit only to be torn down and rebuilt. Twice before, as you can read earlier in chapter 7, God has proclaimed doom against Israel only to be forestalled by Amos’ pleading, but now God warns Amos that his pleas will be to no avail. “I will never again pass them by,” says God to Amos. It is a chilling reminder of the earlier part of the story of the birth of Israel as a nation. When the angel of death had swept the land of Egypt on their behalf, they had been literally passed over thanks to God’s protection. Now God’s protection is removed and God has appointed the Assyrians to carry out the sentence.

The people in the sanctuary at Bethel may have listened aghast to this prophecy of their certain demise but at least one who heard had the temerity to talk back to the man of God. Amaziah was the high priest at Bethel, appointed by the king himself, and if anyone had the right to speak at

Bethel in the name of Yahweh, it was surely Amaziah. He certainly wasn't going to let some interloper, some preacher from down south, stand in his pulpit and preach like this to his people. He was going to put this outsider in his place. "Don't you know where you are?" he said. "Take your collection plates and go back home where you belong. They may like this kind of preaching where you come from but we're more sophisticated up here in the north. This is the king's church, you know. That's his pew right there. If you think I'm going to let you stand here and bad mouth our country and threaten our commander in chief, you are sadly mistaken. I've sent word to the palace about what you've been saying and security ought to be here any minute."

Amos has an answer for him. "I'm not in this for the money. I'm not a professional preacher, not part of the prophet's guild" (which is what it means to be a "son of a prophet," by the way). "I'm just a rancher with a little side business in fruit cultivation. But God spoke to me and I was compelled to leave my farm and come up here to deliver God's message to you. Instead of trying to shut me up, you should be listening to what God is saying to you. If you don't help these people change their ways, you are going to suffer even worse than they will. When the armies come, don't you know they'll defile your wife, kill your children? You'll die in a far away land, eating unclean food, surrounded by unclean people. What's that going to do to all your religious pride?"

Amos, of course, was right, although it took over 20 more years for the axe to fall completely on the kingdom of Israel. It was the house of Jeroboam that fell, as Amos predicted, not Jeroboam himself, as Amaziah falsely reported. Amaziah himself may have been long gone but it is sure that whatever high priest was in charge of the temple at Bethel at the time of the final invasion suffered the fate that Amos predicted. But they are all gone now -- Amos and Amaziah and Jeroboam and the Assyrians and their children's children's children. People and cities and nations, gone and turned to dust.

So how does this speak to us? Should we see parallels between ancient Israel and post-modern America? We, too are prosperous and, for all intents and purposes, at peace. Certainly no nation is a serious threat to actually invade and destroy us. Our battles are of our own adventurous devising. Are we repeating the sins of Jeroboam's Israel here in the United States?

In 21st Century America, the gap between the rich and the poor is growing. According to U.S. Census Bureau statistics, in 1973, the wealthiest 20 percent of households accounted for 44 percent of total U.S. income. In 2002, that share jumped to 50 percent. For the poorest 20 percent, the share dropped from 4.2 percent to 3.5 percent. Two years ago, Isaac Shapiro of the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities said, "Income is now more concentrated at the very top of the income spectrum than in all but six years since the mid-1930s." Even that Conservative's conservative, Alan Greenspan, former Chairman of the Federal Reserve has expressed concern. In 2005, Greenspan pointed out that the 80 percent of the American workforce which includes non-supervisory workers had seen little to no income growth while the top 20 percent had. At a Congressional hearing, Greenspan said, "this is not the type of thing which a democratic society — a capitalist democratic society — can really accept without addressing." Even Alan Greenspan recognizes the danger of trampling the heads of the poor into the dust of the earth. And this sin is not confined to our own shores. This past week at "Soup, Salad and Soul," we

followed up on the latest news of the Jubilee 2000 movement, which seeks to reduce the crushing debt load of poor nations. Just as the balance of wealth in this country shifts farther in favor of the rich, so too we find the richest nations inexorably draining the resources of the poorest.

Amos spoke against those who abhor the one who speaks the truth. Our current administration certainly goes out of its way to protect and support those who fail to speak the truth. Thanks to the actions of President Bush to commute his sentence, Vice President Cheney's former Chief of Staff, "Scooter" Libby won't spend a day in jail despite his conviction on four Federal felony charges of lying and obstructing justice. Of course, just what "justice" means to the current administration is unclear. It was revealed this week that the head of the Justice Department, Attorney General Alberto Gonzales, lied to Congress when he told them that there had been no FBI violations of civil liberties and privacy safeguards since 2001. This rampant disregard for the truth would be shocking had we not become almost inured to it. Is there anyone at all left in the world who does not believe that the U.S. invasion of Iraq was justified by disinformation and outright lies? Those whom our society has entrusted with protecting and administering justice have instead perverted it for their own ends. This is not what the prophet meant when he issued his great call to the people: "Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream."

I believe that like Israel, America will be measured by the measure of our founding. We are not, like Israel, a nation founded simply on the Law of God. The Ten Commandments, despite the claims of some, are not among our founding documents, although they were certainly a mighty influence on our founders. But remember the words of one of our founding documents that I quoted here just two weeks ago: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed, by their Creator, with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness, that to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed..." When I consider the recent decision of the Supreme Court to dismantle programs created to redress centuries of injustice against African-Americans, I wonder how committed our government really is to securing equality for all people. When I read that Snohomish County PUD has to consider it a victory that they have to pay "only" \$18 million to dissolve an unethical contract with the biggest bunch of corporate bandits in the late twentieth century, I wonder just who holds the scales of justice in America. When I remember that the Bush Administration-sponsored Military Commissions Act of 2006 suspends the right of Habeas Corpus, a right guaranteed in the very first article of the Constitution of the United States, then I agree with Jonathan Turley, professor of constitutional law at George Washington University who said, "What a time of shame this is for the American system. What the Congress did and what the president signed today essentially revokes over 200 years of American principles and values." If our nation cannot even stand to scrutiny against the measure of our own founding documents, how bowing and bulging is our wall when compared to the plumb line of God's righteousness?

Perhaps the saddest part of this story from Amos is the reception the prophet got from Amaziah, the high priest of Yahweh at Bethel. Amaziah failed to hear the word of God. He was too intent on protecting his comfortable sinecure. Rather than join Amos in a call for reform, he sent word to the king that Amos was speaking against "national security." As the Presbyterian scholar Dan

Clendenin writes, “(Amaziah) sanctioned the political and economic status quo; (he) pimped (his) religion for Jeroboam's empire.” A recent study by the Barna Research Group shows that “One reason why evangelical churches across the nation are not growing is due to the image that non-Christian adults have of evangelical individuals. In a nationwide survey... among a representative sample of people who do not consider themselves to be Christian, the image of "evangelicals" rated tenth out of eleven groups evaluated, beating out only prostitutes.” Could part of the problem be that we in the Church spend too much time talking about Yahweh’s favor and partiality and not enough time talking about Yahweh’s grace? Have we attempted to reduce Almighty God to just another tribal idol, in the service of America, in the service of America’s elite, which group, of course, we either now or will belong to, according to our pride?

Even if we can honestly look into our hearts and find that we have not attempted to reduce God in favor of our own interests, even if we are not committing the sin of Amaziah and selling out the principles of our faith for our comfort, are we willing to do as Amos did and fearlessly speak the truth to power? This congregation has demonstrated with your actions that you stand on the side of the vulnerable in our society. The donation of nearly half our property to the senior housing project shows it. The history of efforts on behalf of the homeless with IHNS and Habitat for Humanity and Compass Center show it. You have shown where your hearts are with your donations to the Benevolence Fund and the Food Bank and our denominational aid programs. Now let me encourage you to take every opportunity to speak out. When you see or hear or read about instances of injustice, speak out. Write or call or e-mail our elected representatives. Write to CEOs of corporations that pollute or have unfair labor practices. Send letters to the editor of newspapers and magazines that cover the true issues of justice in our society. If our hearts are turned to God and the healing of the nations, we can make a difference with our words as well as our deeds.

It may sound daunting. It is easy to think, “But what do I know about these issues? How am I qualified to be an effective voice?” Writing for “Sojourners Magazine” a few years ago, Jim Rice said, “A plumb line is a deceptively simple tool, nothing more than a stone tied to a piece of string. Yet its message is clear and unmistakable, its measure sure and reliable. Regardless of how out-of-square or atilt an edifice has become, thanks to gravity’s persistent and unwavering tug a plumb line provides an accurate and reliable guide to restoring right relationship to all parts of the structure... Use of the plumb line does not require extraordinary skill or extensive training; the simple fact that the line is vertical and true makes obvious any adjacent discrepancies.” We have in this Book, interpreted within the wisdom of our community and with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, God’s plumb line. As we study together, the truths of God’s will for all of creation are revealed to us. Our call from God is not so very different than that of Amos. We are called to speak the truth, in love, wherever we may go. To speak the truth to the powers of this world and to speak of grace and restoration to those who are downtrodden. God has put the truth in our hearts and God will give us wisdom and the courage to carry the Word out into our world. We know the truth and the truth makes us free. Thanks be to God.