

Scriptures: Luke 10:25-37; Amos 7:7-17

Amos the Prophet

We're continuing on in our series, "Prophet Margins," and examining how God sometimes takes us out of our comfort zones through the actions and words of people who are holding on to Biblical standards and principles. Last week we were called to listen, by Elisha the prophet. This week we're called to look, by Amos the prophet. If you've ever read any of his book, you'll quickly catch on that God repeatedly asks him, "What do you see?" I'll be reading from the New International Version this morning. If you have a Bible, or a Bible app handy, turn with me to Amos 7:7-17. **Read Amos 7:7-17.**

Before we start talking about the particular passage we're looking at today, it's important for us to get a handle on the background and period when it was written, as well as the person who wrote it. First, let's start with the writer. According to the first verse of the book, "The words of Amos, one of the shepherds of Tekoa – what he saw concerning Israel two years before the earthquake, when Uzziah was king of Judah and Jeroboam son of Jehoash was king of Israel," (Amos 1:1). Amos herded sheep, and tended a sycamore-fig grove – he wasn't a priest. The town of Tekoa was about six miles south of Bethlehem, and eleven miles from Jerusalem.

Even though his home was in the southern Kingdom of Judah, Bible scholars believe he was most active in the northern kingdom of Israel, likely in the area surrounding Bethel, which was the northern kingdom's main religious center. The time in which Amos lived was a time of prosperity for both kingdoms – Israel and Judah. It was also a time when people had turned away from God. They were fixated on worshipping idols, living extravagant lifestyles, and were spiritually, morally, and politically corrupt. The poor were oppressed, and the rich just kept getting richer. Does that sound familiar to anyone?

Amos comes onto the scene in the northern kingdom of Israel about forty years after Elisha finished his ministry. He's a contemporary – lived around the same time period – with some other prophets we know from Holy Scripture. For instance, Jonah, who was visiting Nineveh at roughly the same time, along with Isaiah who was doing ministry in Judah towards the end of Amos' ministry. When you look through all the prophetic writings in the Old Testament one common theme emerges, and that's how frequently people turn away from God, and have to be called back into faithful obedience to Him.

What Do You See?

Up to the point we're at in Amos' book today, God had been showing Amos different things which would happen to Israel, Judah, and the surrounding countries because of their idolatry, the extravagant lifestyles they were living, and the spiritual, moral, and political corruption they continued to embrace. "This is what He showed me: The Lord was standing by a wall that had been built true to plumb, with a plumb line in His hand," (Amos 7:7), we read. Israel was being compared to a wall here. It was originally built true to plumb – solid, straight, good. Construction workers, masons, they get this. You have to have straight walls on a building to support the roof, right?

Originally Israel had been true to plumb – it had been a nation that was following, and should have kept following God. Think about some of the Old Testament stories we know from Genesis and Exodus, and even Joshua. The people were led through the Red Sea on dry ground. If you or I saw something as miraculous as that today, we'd believe, wouldn't we? If atheists saw something that unusual and amazing today, I think they'd probably believe.

Yet the ancient Israelites frequently grumbled. They seemed to constantly turn away, and God would have to woo them back into relationship with Himself after allowing terrible natural disasters, or other hardships to befall them. Seeing miracles must have been so common and ordinary in those days, that people just must have taken it for granted, I suppose. Later, the Israelites would be led by righteous and wise kings – David and Solomon – who both did what God called them to do, for the most part. So Israel has this history – or heritage – of being true to plumb, in the sense of being in a truly unique covenant relationship to God, because of all the great things God had done for that specific nation.

"And the Lord asked me, 'What do you see, Amos?' 'A plumb line,' I replied. Then the Lord said, 'Look, I am setting a plumb line among My people Israel; I will spare them no longer,'" (verse 8). Here again we're reminded that God's people had been built, so to speak, on God's standards. Today where do we find God's standards, Church? The Bible. God expects His people to hold true to Biblical standards. The problem was, that when God tested His people, they weren't "true to plumb." They were a crooked wall.

Shifting Sands

Kendra and Marissa participated in a mission outreach event recently through some connections they have with Fellowship of Christian Athletes. They worked on a house up in Lima, Ohio. The couple who bought the house lived out of state, and had purchased it online, looking only at pictures the realtor had sent them. The person who had lived in the house had moved away, and had left everything there. Now that doesn't sound too bad, does it?

Except that the pictures sent to them by the realtor were twenty years old. A storm had come along and busted the roof over a section on the back side of the house. The roof and ceiling below it had caved in at some point, allowing weather and animals access to the inside of the house. The basement walls and floor had also crumbled and eroded away, causing some of the support beams in the basement to tilt. It's an unfortunate thing this particular family is going through – I hope they pursue some legal options so the dishonest realtor is no longer able to sell houses in Ohio!

What do you do with crooked walls, or foundations which are so eroded away, that you're on nothing but shifting sand? God told Amos what He was going to do in this situation with His people. He said, "The high places of Isaac will be destroyed and the sanctuaries of Israel will be ruined; with My sword I will rise against the house of Jeroboam," (verse 9). He was going to wipe out the thing that gave the people in the northern kingdom the most pride – their places of worship!

Golden Calves

Remember the time when Moses was on the mountain, getting the Ten Commandments, and he came down the mountain, and the people had made a golden calf? Well, apparently the people constantly wrestled with this idol, because when Jeroboam rebelled against Solomon's son Rehoboam, and set himself up as king of the northern kingdom, he set up a golden calf at Bethel. It's the very place, and the specific thing, that Amos is speaking out against. Idol worship makes God very angry!

"Then Amaziah the priest of Bethel sent a message to Jeroboam king of Israel: 'Amos is raising a conspiracy against you in the very heart of Israel. The land cannot bear all his words,'" (verse 10). See friends, Amos' message struck a chord with Amaziah, the guy who's in charge of leading the worship services at the temple in Bethel. By the way, just so we're clear, most of the people were praying to a golden calf there. That's what their focus was on. It wasn't on God! So Amaziah sends a message to the king, Jeroboam II, who's named after the guy who rebelled about 120 years earlier from Solomon's son.

Amaziah summarizes what Amos was saying. "Jeroboam will die by the sword, and Israel will surely go into exile, away from their native land," (verse 11). If you're familiar with the Old Testament, or history in general, the word God spoke through Amos came true. Jeroboam's son, Zechariah, was assassinated, and several years later, the people were carried off to exile in Assyria.

The Pot Calls The Kettle Black

"Then Amaziah said to Amos, 'Get out, you seer! Go back to the land of Judah. Earn your bread there and do your prophesying there. Don't prophesy anymore at Bethel, because this is the king's sanctuary and the temple of the kingdom,'" (verses 12-13). The idol-worshipping priest Amaziah dismissed Amos as a prophet, and made

him out to be someone looking to make a quick buck, who people shouldn't take seriously. Since Amaziah is the priest in the king's temple at Bethel, his loyalty is to Jeroboam instead of God. He accuses Amos of being someone for hire, but he's the one doing stuff for material gain. It's a classic example of the pot calling the kettle black!

Notice how Amos responds to Amaziah's criticism of him. "I was neither a prophet nor a prophet's son, but I was a shepherd, and I also took care of sycamore-fig trees. But the Lord took me from tending the flock and said to me, 'Go, prophesy to My people Israel,'" (verses 14-15). In other words, being a prophet was not something on Amos' radar. He didn't get to his senior year of high school, and say, "Yep, I think I'm going to go into prophesying when I grow up." He's called by God later in life to the prophetic ministry. No one had hired him to leave Judah and come north to Israel to critique or criticize Jeroboam and Israel.

Amos continues. "Now then, hear the word of the Lord. You say, 'Do not prophesy against Israel, and stop preaching against the house of Isaac.' Therefore this is what the Lord says: 'Your wife will become a prostitute in the city, and your sons and daughters will fall by the sword. Your land will be measured and divided up, and you yourself will die in a pagan country. And Israel will certainly go into exile, away from their native land,'" (verses 16-17). Those are hard words to hear, especially for the political and religious leaders of his day! King Jeroboam would die, his son would become king in his place, and would be assassinated, and just a few short years later, the whole nation of Israel would be carried off into exile in Assyria.

Amaziah the priest's family would also fall by the sword – he'd end up carried off to exile as well. Idolatry – sin – hijacks and carries off people even today, which is why the world desperately needs to hear about Jesus Christ! I'm going to level with you; while the message and content of Amos was originally geared and written for the ancient Israelite nation, it's just as pertinent to the Church today, especially here in the United States. Here's what I mean. We've talked a few times about dysfunctional families over the last two weeks.

Staying "True to Plumb?"

The American Church is a dysfunctional family. The United Methodist Church is a dysfunctional family. None of us have stayed "true to plumb," so to speak, as followers of Jesus Christ. People fuss and agonize over some of the most trivial things. When we get so fixated on a singular issue – take your pick of whatever that may be – and say, "Nope, I can't attend or support this church because of their stance on _____." That's a spiritual problem.

There are folks putting out a lot of misinformation regarding the United Methodist Church in particular. If you have questions about where the United Methodist Church

stands on various issues, catch me sometime after worship so we can talk about these issues. I'll answer your questions as accurately as possible, based on my current knowledge of where the United Methodist Church stands. Despite various attempts, not much has changed since the UMC formed in 1968. The United Methodist Church, specifically, continues to affirm the sanctity and value of human life, from conception to natural death. The United Methodist Church continues to recognize that marriage is a life-long covenant relationship to be entered into by one man and one woman, and that there are lifestyles that are incompatible with Christian teaching.

My point is, if we have a laser-like focus on one specific issue, instead of being focused on Jesus Christ – we're no better than the ancient Israelites who Amos was saying this stuff to when he first said it. It's idolatry. Our own desire for righteousness trips us up and takes our focus off Him. Right now we are living in the age of grace. We're called to love all people – even if we disagree with them.

I have some friends in other denominations who have forgotten the grace Jesus has shown to them, and think we're living in the age of judgment. That we should point out all the mistakes people are making in their lives, and that we should shun people who aren't like us. I can't do that. I know the terrible price Jesus Christ paid to win me – and the price He paid to win you, and them – and I can't turn a blind eye and send a message to the effect that a human life doesn't mean anything. Every single person who has ever been conceived are precious in His sight.

Jesus Will Come To Judge

That being said, there is an age of judgment coming. In 325, Emperor Constantine the Great called the Council of Nicaea together to end several heresies, and to formalize the beliefs of the ancient Church. They wrote the Nicene Creed. The creed talks extensively about Jesus.

“We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father; through him all things were made. For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven, was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and became truly human. For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried. On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures; he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.”¹

Roughly seventy-five years later, a letter mentioning the “Apostle’s Creed,” was written to a church council in Milan, Italy. The Apostle’s Creed also speaks of Jesus Christ:

1 The Nicene Creed, UMH 880.

“I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried; he descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again; he ascended into heaven, is seated at the right hand of the Father, and will come again to judge the living and the dead.”²

In both these creeds we're told only One person will judge the living and the dead. That Person is Jesus Christ, when He comes again. It's not my friends in other denominations doing the judging. It's not the United Methodist Church, the Global Methodist Church, or any other Church doing the judging. It won't be Rob Berryman doing the judging. And it won't be you who'll be doing the judging, either. Only Jesus will do that. So in all the issues facing the Church – issues that seek to divide, and distract us from what and who our real focus should be on – I'm content to let Jesus be the judge, and to just go where He leads, which is the same thing Amos the prophet did.

Before the American Civil War a Baptist pastor wrote *Give Me Jesus*, which was picked up in camp meetings by Methodists, and spread through the South during and immediately after the war. It was adapted, and became an African-American spiritual and was adapted at the turn of the 20th century by Fanny Crosby. More recently it's been recorded by various artists including Fernando Ortega, Vince Gill, and Danny Gokey. It's a good message for us today. The Church, in general needs to hear it, and as followers of Jesus Christ we especially need to hear it:

“In the morning when I rise/ In the morning when I rise/ In the morning when I rise/ Give me Jesus./ Give me Jesus/ Give me Jesus/ You can have all this world/ Just give me Jesus.”

When we're focused on Him instead of our selves, it makes all the difference! He wants to still use us to reach people. He calls us to show them that He loves them enough to take the nails, and leave the empty tomb!

Prayer: Divine Judge, You framed the earth with love and mercy and declared it good; yet we, desiring to justify ourselves, judge others harshly. Keep us faithful in prayer that we may be filled with the knowledge of Your good and perfect will, and not ignore or pass by the needs of “the other,” but plumb the depths of love in showing mercy. Amen.

2 The Apostle's Creed, UMH 882.