

THE PLUMB LINE

**a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, January 19, 2020
based on Isaiah 10:1-4, Amos 7:7-15, Matthew 5:13-16**

The sermon this morning is the second in a three-part sermon series entitled, "Set Right with God," focusing on how human beings in all our waywardness can be put on the right course, how in our brokenness we can be set right with God. {prayer}

One of the most famous images in the Biblical prophets is the image of the plumb line. It appears in one place in Isaiah, who said that God declares, "I will make justice the measuring line and righteousness the plumb line" (Isaiah 28:17), and it appears first as an image in Amos. A plumb line, created simply by attaching a weight to a length of string, was one of the most common building tools in the ancient world, as it was a perfect way to determine if a wall or a pillar was vertically straight. A wall that was out of plumb would not be standing very long. The fact that many ancient walls and pillars still stand is proof that ancient builders were quite good at using plumb lines and building things perfectly straight.

But while they had mastered the art of getting buildings vertical, they were not so good at getting life morally straight. This was true not only on the level of personal morality, where many people were off kilter in their personal lives, but it was also very true on a social scale. The prophets were especially concerned with whether the society as a whole was in line with God's righteousness. This is what Amos was talking about when he declared: "The Lord was standing beside a wall with a plumb line in his hand. And the Lord said to me, "Amos, what do you see?" And I said, "A plumb line." Then the Lord said, "Behold, I am setting a plumb line in the midst of my people Israel." (Amos 7:7-8) It is graphic image. Imagine God setting a plumb line in the midst of our society. Are we in line with how God calls us to be?

The judgment of the prophets in the days of ancient Israel was quite often that their society was out of plumb. The prophet Isaiah, a younger contemporary of Amos, declared exactly that message in the passage we heard this morning. He talked about the rulers making "iniquitous decrees and oppressive statutes," which had the effect of "turning aside the needy from justice and robbing the poor of their right." [*Ah, you who make iniquitous decrees, who write oppressive statutes, to turn aside the needy from justice and to rob the poor of my people of their right, that widows may be your spoil, and that you may make the orphans your prey! Isaiah 10:1-2*] The prophets emphasized that God calls for a caring society in which there is particular concern for people at the bottom of the social scale. In ancient days, that meant especially widows and orphans. But too often the rulers and the powerful in the society were primarily concerned with their own wealth and power, and the lowly were disregarded or even exploited.

The prophets therefore critiqued the rulers and declared that God's judgment was coming. As Isaiah went on to say, "What will you do on the day of punishment . . . For all this God's anger has not turned away, and His hand is stretched out still." (Isaiah 10:2,4) There would ultimately be consequences for unjust leadership. That last line was a way of saying that God's punishment would be ongoing.

The prophet Amos likewise declared a word of judgment against the King of Israel, who at the time was Jeroboam II. As Amos said, "The sanctuaries of Israel shall be laid waste, and the Lord will rise against the house of Jeroboam with the sword." (Amos 7:9) According to Amos, circumstances in Israel were so bad that serious judgment was coming. But what is especially interesting is that, during this time, by every typical human measure, circumstances in Israel were actually quite good. King Jeroboam II was a strong ruler, who, during a long reign in the 8th century B.C., had gained the upper hand over Israel's adversaries and had expanded the nation's boundaries, making Israel a major regional power. Furthermore, through booming trade with the Phoenicians and others, he had ushered in period of economic prosperity. Lots of people in Israel were quite happy with Jeroboam. But God measures differently from human beings. God, according to Amos and Isaiah, was concerned with corruption in the land, with indifference to the poor, and with the fact that many people had turned from the true worship of God to idolatry. So the prophets brought a word of judgment and a call for change.

This was not popular. In the story of Amos, we heard about Amaziah, who was the priest of the sanctuary at Bethel. Amaziah was in close alliance with Jeroboam, and he had turned Bethel into a place where there was little true worship of God, but there was lots of support for King Jeroboam and the status quo. Amaziah was in a position of prominence and power; and he said to Amos, 'O seer, go away, flee to the land of Judah, and earn your living there. Prophecy there; but never again prophecy at Bethel, for this is the king's sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom.' (Amos 7:12-13) In other words, "Amos, get lost."

But Amos replied that being a prophet was not a job that he might pursue anywhere. Actually by trade he was a "herdsman and a dresser of sycamore trees" (the Biblical sycamore being similar to a fig). Being a prophet was a calling, and God had called him to preach to the kingdom of Israel, which he intended to continue to do. [*"I am no prophet, nor a prophet's son; but I am a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees, and the Lord took me from following the flock, and the Lord said to me, 'Go, prophesy to my people Israel.'"* Amos 7:14-15]

The book of Amos is actually the earliest of all the prophetic books, and ever since then, prophetic voices through the ages have continued to follow the pattern that Amos set. Martin Luther King Jr. was a modern day prophet in the style of Amos. In the 1950's and 60's, America was enjoying a period of great prosperity and had attained a position of preeminence on the world stage. But Martin Luther King loudly declared that all was not

well, that our society was out of plumb with God's desire for us. His message was not popular, and like many prophets before him he suffered for it. It is easier to be an Amaziah than an Amos.

Today our society is in another time of prosperity and preeminence on the world stage. But people of faith are always called to shape their view according to God's plumb line. This means that the church should always be at a critical distance from any government and any national state of affairs, because a society is never perfect, and even the best rulers are never wholly in line with God's righteousness. I generally try to avoid saying much about politics in preaching; but if you truly proclaim God's Word, you inevitably end up sometimes sounding like Amos, speaking a word that brings critique or even judgment to the rulers of the age.

Four years ago, I was preaching a sermon one morning about how God calls us to spiritual humility, versus human pride and the continual human quest after greatness. Human beings are always trying to make themselves great on the world stage; but as Jesus said, "Those who exalt themselves will be humbled, while those who humble themselves will be exalted." (Luke 14:11)

After the sermon, a couple people commented to me about how political the sermon was. I was rather mystified at the time; because in my mind I was just focusing on a classic Biblical theme about greatness versus humility. I had not been thinking about what was going on right then in the presidential campaign, and how there was a candidate named Donald Trump who was building his whole campaign around an idea of "Make America Great Again." It was an example of how, even if the preacher is not trying to be political, the words of the Bible inherently speak a decisive word to the politics of the age.

When preachers speak the prophetic word, they are generally about as popular as Amos. People often don't like it. I have had people walk out of worship because they did not like the political implications of something I said. But the worst thing the church can ever do is to cozy up to a government. Historically, through the ages, the church at times has gotten in league with a government, which bestows a temporary advantage upon church leaders. A prime example would be pre-revolutionary France. But such church-state alliances have always proved disastrous, because every government is flawed, and if the church is identified with the government, the church will eventually go down with the government.

Over the past few years, many theologians across America have expressed considerable concern about the close alliance that is happening today between so-called evangelical churches and our current president. The issue is not that some Christians might support a particular president, since we are always casting our vote for one political leader or another. The issue is that a particular segment of the church—that large group of so-called evangelical congregations—has become a political bloc, often featured in the news, that is giving a full-blown uncritical devotion to President Trump. A number of

leading evangelical pastors have continually lauded the President, forming a tight circle around him, blasting his critics as heathens and urging their followers to provide unyielding support no matter what he says or does. From a Biblical perspective, they appear very much as modern-day Amaziah's. Finally, a few weeks ago, Christianity Today magazine, founded by Billy Graham, which is the leading evangelical magazine in the country, came out with an editorial which said what many prophetic voices had long been saying—that the church's uncritical alignment with a morally flawed leader was inconsistent with Christian values and was going to ultimately bring very negative consequences. As the editorial put it, unless evangelical churches changed course, "The whole game will come crashing down on the reputation of evangelical religion and on the world's understanding of the gospel." [Christianity Today, December 19, 2019] And it is not only "evangelical" churches that are damaged in this scenario. The proclamation of the gospel by everyone is hindered whenever the gospel becomes publicly identified with a particular government or a particular politics, because while the gospel is perfect, the government and politics are not. None if this means that Christians must vote a particular way; no matter who you vote for, you will surely be voting for a flawed candidate. What the perspective of faith means is that Christians should continually be viewing every ruler, every government, from the critical perspective of God's plumb line.

It is worth noting here what the word "evangelical" actually means. The word comes from the Greek word εὐαγγέλιον [*euangelion*], which means "good news," or is also commonly translated "gospel." An evangelical, Biblically speaking, is someone who proclaims the good news of Jesus Christ. This means that in a Biblical sense we Methodists are all evangelicals; and indeed the term has historically been used to broadly refer to Christians of all sorts. In Germany, the main federation of Protestant churches is simply called the *Evangelische* or Evangelical Church; and in our Methodist history, the Methodists in 1968 merged with a church called the Evangelical United Brethren Church to form the United Methodist Church. But today in America the term "evangelical" has come to represent a particular blending of religious and political loyalties—something the prophets warned against—which is why many of us now refrain from using the term to describe ourselves.

The Bible calls us to the true "euangelion"—to be people who focus upon Christ; for Christ is the ultimate plumb line by which all things are rightly measured. Christ embodies all the themes that we see in the prophets—the concern for the lowly, the critique of the powerful, the desire to see individuals and the whole society authentically in line with God's values. Sometimes when we think of the saving work of Jesus Christ, we are inclined to think of it purely on an individual level; we think of how Christ can bring us personally to be set right with God. We will pursue that personal saving work of Christ further in the final sermon in this series next Sunday. But Christ also has a call for entire societies; Christ

would bring us not only to personal righteousness but also to social justice, to be a society set right with God.

In the 1950's, if you were to visit the average white person in the South, you would probably have encountered a very friendly, pleasant person with strong Christian beliefs. Especially if you were also white, you would likely have experienced Southern hospitality and would have been invited in for a big glass of sweet tea. That same person would probably have vigorously insisted that people with black skin should go to separate rest rooms and sit in the back of the bus. People in that day easily talked about Christ saving us from personal sin; but they struggled to realize that there is also social sin—there are ways that society as a whole can be radically out of line with God's will.

So Jesus calls us to be the salt of the earth [*You are the salt of the earth Matthew 5:13*—salt being something that affects everything that it touches, and that has the effect of preserving something or making something good. Jesus likewise called us to be the light of the world—like a lamp set on a lampstand giving light to all in the house—which brings the whole place from darkness to light. [*You are the light of the world. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. Matthew 5:14-15*] In the Methodist movement, we have long been concerned to follow this call to have a positive effect on the world around us, to apply God's values to the entire social order. A century ago, Methodists were on the forefront of the movement to end child labor in America. A half-century ago, Methodists were very involved in the Civil Rights Movement. Martin Luther King Jr. became Dr. Martin Luther King at Boston University, a Methodist school, which was actually the place where he began to become especially interested in social activism. Today we continue to follow this prophetic theme—that we are to be at work to set the whole world right with God. That, of course, may seem a tall order. But the method of Jesus has always been to work through individual people to transform the broader world. He did not align himself with the rulers, but empowered a small group of disciples who ultimately made a huge impact. Walter Rauschenbusch, a 19th century theologian who was especially attuned to the social implications of the gospel, expressed it this way: “God wants to turn humanity right side up, but He needs a fulcrum. Every saved soul is a fixed point on which God can rest His lever.” [Christianizing the Social Order] May we each be such a fixed point upon which the lever of God's righteousness can be at work to set our world right today.