

God's Plumb Line

Scripture: Amos 7:7-9; 8:4-7; 9:7-8 (The Inclusive Bible)

Today's reading is from a little known book in the Hebrew Scriptures called Amos. Amos was one of the lesser prophets of Israel and his little book is sandwiched between Joel and Obadiah, prophets whose written word is even shorter than that of Amos. They are all included in the twelve prophetic books that can be found at the end of the Old Testament.

So what do we know about this prophet? Well Amos lived about 800 years before the birth of Jesus in a time of relative peace for the Israelite people. And, like so many of YHWH's prophets, Amos had no intention of taking on this particular vocation. At one point in chapter 7 of his book, Amos says, "I am no prophet. Nor am I the disciple of a prophet. I was a shepherd, and gathered figs for food. But YHWH took me from herding the flock and said to me, "Go, prophesy to my people Israel'" (Amos 7:14-15). So Amos, at least for a short time, took on the task of sharing God's word with the Israelites.

So what did Amos prophesy? Well, he was a prophet who liked to use metaphors and in today's reading Amos says, "God was standing by a wall, a plumb line in hand." First, let's make sure we all know what a plumb line is. Who can describe a plumb line? (wait for answers – a string with a weight on the end). How many of you have used a plumb line? What did you use it for? (wait for answers). A plumb line is used to determine a true vertical line. It's

something that has been used by builders for centuries. I have used a plumb line to make sure that I was hanging wallpaper on a true vertical line.

So let's find out why God is standing by a wall with a plumb line in hand. Amos goes on with his story:

“What do you see, Amos?” YHWH asked me.
“A plumb line,” I said.
Then God said to me,
“Look, I am going to measure my people Israel by plumb line.
I will no longer excuse their atrocities.”

God is about to measure the Israelite people using a string and a weight. YHWH is going to see if the Hebrew people are straying from the “true vertical,” “the straight and narrow,” “the way of God.”

But what exactly is God worried about? Amos' prophesy talks about atrocities. But it wasn't clear in the reading from Chapter 7 just what types of mayhem God's plumb line was going to measure. So I read a little further into Chapter 8 and found these additional words from Amos:

Listen to this, you who live off of the needy
and oppress the poor of the land,
you who say,we will sell our wheat
charging higher prices for smaller portions,
thus tilting the scales in our favor.

It turns out that the peaceful times in which Amos lived, had led to prosperity but only for a few of the Hebrew people. A wealthy class had emerged at the top of their society and it was getting richer while oppressing those who were on the margins. According to Amos, the wealthy could “buy the poor for silver and the

needy for a pair of sandals.” These people at the top of Israelite society were living a life that wasn’t even close to vertical.

I then read farther into Chapter 9 and found another way that the people of Israel were straying from God’s plumb line. In those days, the Israelites believed that they were God’s chosen people. They believed that YHWH was their God and would always be on their side against their enemies. They believed therefore that they were always on the right side. But Amos spoke these words from God:

Aren’t the children of Ethiopia the same to me
as you are, children of Israel?
—It is YHWH who speaks.
True, I brought Israel out of the land of Egypt.
But I also led the Philistines in their own exodus
from Caphtor,
and brought the Arameans out of Kir.

Amos was one of the first Hebrew prophets to suggest that YHWH wasn’t just the God of the Israelites, but that YHWH, was the God of all people. Amos was telling the Israelites that they couldn’t assume that they were always in line with God’s plan. And they couldn’t assume that it was OK to attack and kill other people just because they were from a different race, culture or religion. In fact, he was telling the Israelites that they were well off God’s plumb line and there was about to be a correction.

What I found fascinating about God’s plumb line was it had nothing to do with how pious the Israelites were, how many sacrifices they offered or whether they were following all the cleanliness laws in the Torah. It wasn’t about excessive eating or drinking, how you dressed or who you had sex with or any other form of

personal or private sin. God's plumb line was set based on how you treated your neighbour, whether that neighbour lived on the same street, in the same town in an adjoining country or even across the Mediterranean. It applied especially to how you treated those who were on the margins, those who were unable to care for themselves, those who, for whatever reason were seen as the outsider.

As I was reading the book of Amos this week, I couldn't help but think about the events of last weekend. On July 1st people across our nation celebrated Canada Day. In every town and city, every province and territory, there were barbeques, parades and fireworks. It was a wonderful celebration of the amazing country in which we live. Here in Swift Current, it was also Frontier Days, a time to remember those who came and settled this land and started the tradition of farming and ranching that built this community.

And I thought to myself, how are we doing with God's plumb line? As we celebrate all the wonderful things about living in Canada, and, in particular, in SW Saskatchewan how close are we to the true vertical? Maybe, like the Israelites, we should take a look at what we need to do to shift ourselves closer to God's plumb line.

For instance, I could be wrong, but I don't remember seeing anything in our Canada Day parade that even acknowledged the existence of Indigenous or Metis people in this community. How do we celebrate Canada Day while also celebrating the Indigenous nations, cultures and religions that were here thousands of years before Columbus arrived. How do we celebrate Canada Day

while also acknowledging the great harm that colonization did to our Indigenous neighbours? How do we celebrate Canada Day in a way that recognizes that God, YHWH, loves us all, whether our ancestors were Indigenous to North America or whether they came from one of the other continents of this world.

It was heartening to see some floats in the Canada Day parade that recognized and celebrated diversity within our community. Thanks to the Newcomer Centre and SW Pride, we were able to celebrate people of different races, cultures, gender identities and sexual orientations. We also saw people of different ages and genders. Members of SW Pride were thrilled with the reception they received along the parade route.

But I also heard from one grandmother, that her grandchildren experienced someone booing them as they rode by on the Pride float. Imagine your child or grandchild being booed in a parade. There is a reason why we painted our steps in rainbow colours. We know there is still work to do. Our diversity plumb line here in Swift Current is still not a true vertical.

We also need to look at how we treat the poor and needy in our province and country. Here in Saskatchewan we live in the birthplace of Medicare so it's hard to believe that in 2022 we have the lowest minimum wage in all of Canada! Our minimum wage is \$11.81. Nunavut has a minimum wage of \$16.00, Alberta, our neighbour to the west, has a wage of \$15.00 and even Newfoundland has a minimum wage of \$13.20. How is it that here in Saskatchewan we are so far off the true vertical? How is it that we are now the province with most oppressive

minimum wage? And I haven't even mentioned the devastating changes to social assistance that have occurred in Saskatchewan in the last year!

Yes we live in an amazing country and province and we should recognize and celebrate our good fortune. But we also need to ask ourselves, "How can we wave our maple leaf flag with pride and also treat those who are marginalized in our society and in our world with the care and the respect that they deserve?"

I want to leave you with an image that represents one of the ways our congregation and our city are working toward that true vertical. On Canada Day, several members of our congregation attended the flag-raising ceremony at Memorial Park. We were there because the Etmeh family were given the privilege of raising the Canadian flag this year. I don't know how many of you realize it, but Anas and Heba passed the written test and officially became Canadian citizens last year. Here at First United we can take great pride in our part in making that happen.

May we continue to live and work towards the true vertical that is God's plumb line. May it be so. Amen.