

“What’s your Plumb Line?”

A Sermon by the Rev. Scott Herr

First Presbyterian Church, New Canaan, CT – July 11, 2021

Please Read:

Amos 7:7-15

Mark 6:14-29

When my father, brother, and I were building my parents’ first dream home, we took pride in making sure the foundation was level, and that the walls were square. My dad built a number of houses before building their own, so he knew what he was doing. After we completed framing out the second floor, he took out a plumb bob (very much like this one!), and from one of the corners dropped it to the ground to see if we had a straight corner. A plumb bob, sometimes called a plummet, is a weight, usually with a pointed tip on the bottom, suspended from a string and used as a vertical reference line, or plumb line to find the perfect vertical line for walls or other structures.

In our text from the prophet Amos, we read, “the Lord was standing beside a wall built with a plumb line, with a plumb line in his hand.” What is Amos talking about? Amos was reminding people that God has a moral vision for human society, a vision for justice to which we are called to measure our lives and life together as a society, a vision by which our reality will be judged by God. The historical context of this text was the reign of King Jeroboam, the first King of the Northern Kingdom of Israel in the 10<sup>th</sup> century BCE, a reign which was said to have lasted for about 22 years, and which ended catastrophically in the assassination of his son and the slaughter of his whole family. The first book of Kings mentions that no member of the House of Jeroboam was left to breathe.<sup>1</sup>

Peter Drucker once said the primary responsibility of any leader is to “define reality.” In other words, Presidents, Kings, Queens, CEOs, Elders, Pastors, anyone charged with leadership over a group of people are called to be honest about the challenges the people are facing, and to lead in such a way that there are no bad surprises. I was taught you can’t be *disillusioned* if you don’t have any illusions. In other words, God is a God of reality, and sooner or later we will face reality. I often quote Goethe’s wry dictum at weddings, that “love is an *ideal* thing and marriage is a *real* thing and a confusion of the two never goes unpunished!”

We joke, but our world is increasingly being molded and formed by “virtual” reality, a reality that can easily be manipulated and changed “digitally,” and the plumb line for what is just, good, true and beautiful, is easily blurred or skewed. Did you know the root of our word “pornography” in the Greek, *porneo*, simply means “bent” or “distorted”?

Amos spoke the truth unabashedly, at great risk. He claims he wasn’t a professional prophet, paid to do the King’s bidding, but rather a farmer. Farmers tend to be salt of the earth, no-nonsense folk, right? And farmers, often times to their peril, have to deal with reality. All this is by way of saying that our prophetic text today is saying that despite the fact that we worship the God who is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness (Exodus 34:6-7), even God’s patience has limits and sooner or later we will have to deal with the real consequences of our choices. Unfortunately for Jeroboam and his family, they did not heed to prophets’ warnings, and suffered the consequences.

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<sup>1</sup> I Kings 15:29.

I'm not saying that God did something terrible to Jeroboam's family. But God has given a plumbline, a standard, and most of us have learned that in the "real world," moral corruption has consequences. We can avoid getting caught in a speed trap some of the time, but if we speed most of the time, eventually we will get the ticket and pay the consequences. The tragic Florida high rise collapse can be traced back to shoddy construction and a lack of proper accountability structures. Haitian politics are beyond corruption, and apparently it caught up with former president M $\ddot{o}$ ise ... Many of us complain about government regulations, but climate change is catching up with us, and at times coercion (through taxation and penalties) is the only way government can get us to change our ways.

Unfortunately, speaking truth to power can be hazardous to your health. Hong Kong is going through a dramatic transformation from a free society to a totalitarian society, and so people trying to speak the truth are being arrested and silenced with force. It's an old story with many examples in history, whether in Egypt, Israel, Russia, China, various banana Republics or dictatorships in Latin America and Africa, and yes, even here in our great nation. Vietnam, Iraq, and now Afghanistan are more recent examples of thousands and thousands of lives, and billions and billions of dollars being sunk into dubious wars ... Ironically, we are having a stranger than fiction battle for reality between die-hard Q-anon folks who think they are speaking truth to power and those who think they are delusional ... What are we to think? Who can we believe? And at what cost? And why on earth would we be ruining a perfectly peaceful Sunday morning by focusing on a text where the main event is a beheading?

I guess the simple answer is that it's complicated! First of all, we use the lectionary texts, and no, I wouldn't have chosen them, but that's why I use the lectionary. It forces me and all of us to listen to the "whole gospel," whether we like it or not.

Secondly, there is good news and bad news here ... The bad news is that our gospel text is about a prophet who didn't get away and is the longest and one of the few stories in Mark's gospel where Jesus does not actually appear.<sup>2</sup> And although the dramatic story is intrinsically about John the Baptist, John never appears either. Well, only his head!

The good news is, strangely, that this story actually is all about Jesus. It's a story about the plumb line of Jesus and *how Jesus measures the use of power*. It's a story about the difference between the injustice of the Kingdoms of this world and the justice of the Kingdom of God! The grisly story of John is a flashback, as the first few verses of the passage make clear. Verses 14-16 are part of the ongoing narrative of Jesus. His disciples had come back to report to Jesus about how they had gone out and proclaimed that all should repent and that demons were cast out and many who were sick had been cured in his name (vv 12-13). Immediately this Kingdom of Heaven reality is contrasted with the Kingdom of Herod reality. Herod had heard of Jesus, but was saying that "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised."

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<sup>2</sup> The other two are the story of Golgatha, Mark 14:1-2, 10-11; and the discovery of the empty tomb, Mark 16:1-8.

The story of the execution of John, you see, is a foreshadowing of what will happen to Jesus. John comes before Herod as Jesus will come before Pilate. Herod is intrigued by the innocence of John, just as Pilate is amazed by the innocence of Jesus, and both rulers are swept up by dark forces that lead to unjust condemnation of their prisoners. John and Jesus are essentially passive before their deaths, and both Herod and Pilate refuse to use their power for good. Both John and Jesus are brutally executed, and their mutilated bodies are displayed for all to see ... And finally, their disciples come and take their bodies and lay them in a tomb ...

But why this story now in the gospel narrative? Mark's editorial subtlety is brilliant ... While the disciples had gone around proclaiming that all should repent, clearly the rulers of this age do not have it in them to change their minds to do what is good and true. They have already made the Faustian bargain and are committed to keeping their power rather than risking it for doing what is just and merciful. Mark is no fool. Just as the cheery disciples return to report to Jesus about their successful mission trip, Mark inserts this ominous foreshadowing of where the parade is really headed ... To Calvary. Not only was John beheaded, but Jesus, the real hero of the story, will be crucified.

Interestingly, this lectionary text comes just after our American celebration of independence. Perhaps we also need to consider our freedoms and how we use our power? And to what extent we put our hope in the political powers and principalities of our country? The larger context of our world is rather depressing to me. Crooked lines drive me crazy. I like straight lines. But I have to admit, there is no such thing as straight lines in this world. Everything is bent. But as the old Scottish saying goes, "God writes straight with crooked lines."

Mark is contrasting the Kingdoms of this world with the Kingdom of God, and ever so subtly warning us not to put our hope in the Kingdoms of this world or the power of Herod. We need to see that our plumb line is measured next to Jesus and his justice. The next passage in Mark 6 is the feeding of the 5,000 where we see Jesus feeding the poor and the hungry by humbly looking up to heaven and blessing the little they have. Mark is contrasting how King Herod is trying to hold onto his power with how King Jesus is trying to give his power away and how our plumb line is the self-giving love of Jesus ...

So here's the question of the week: What's your plumb line? What's the measure, the metric of your spiritual health? I love Steven Covey's 1988 bestseller, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, when he discusses the habit summarized as "Begin with the End in Mind." He writes, "Know where you're going so that you better understand where you are now and so that the steps you take are always in the right direction. It's incredibly easy to get caught up in an activity trap, in the busyness of life, to work harder and harder at climbing the ladder of success only to discover it's leaning against the wrong wall."<sup>3</sup>

Summer is a good time to slow down and smell the roses, but also look at your life compass and recalibrate where you are going and get out your plumb bob and measure how straight your priorities are against God's priorities and values. *Are you building walls or are you building bridges?* Are you doing justice, loving kindness and walking humbly with your thoughts, words and actions? Are you forgiving as you have been forgiven? Are you loving as you are loved?

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<sup>3</sup> Stephen R. Covey, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* (New York: Free Press, 2004), 98.

Our actions speak a thousand words. You see, to *live* the gospel is our main calling, to live out the grace of Jesus Christ, to say with our *actions* that we love God and the people around us; to forgive those who hurt us; to go the second mile and give the other coat; to serve rather than seek to be served; to give of oneself that others may know amazing grace.

Mark wants us to learn the hard truth that when the church rises up to be the church, the world rises up to be the world. *Yet he also wants us to learn that when the world rises up to be the world, Jesus Christ rises up from the dead!* That's the good news. God is alive and on the loose in the world to show us that the power of love overcomes hatred; God's power of forgiveness overcomes condemnation; God's power of life overcomes death. As Martin Luther wrote it, "the body they may kill, God's truth abideth still, *God's kingdom is forever ...*"

So, I invite you to take time to reflect on "What's Your Plumb Line?" The good news in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ is about how God's love changes us, and about how God's love through us will change the world. It may sound crazy, but the good news of God's love in Jesus Christ is the most absolute power in the world. May we *not* corrupt the power of God's love for the world, with our love for the power of the world. May we look to Jesus, who gave it away, who emptied himself for others. And may we too, measure and align our lives with the self-giving power of God's love. That is the best plumb line I know ...

*In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.*