

AMOS: Living Level and Plumb

Sunday, June 9, 2019

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Amos 7:7-17

A carpenter planned to retire. He told his employer of his plans to leave the business and start a life of leisure with his wife and extended family. He would miss the money, but the time was right, and he was ready to hang up his hammer.

His boss was disappointed. The carpenter was a loyal and diligent worker for many years. He was sad to see him go. He asked for one last favor, requesting that the carpenter could build one last house before retiring.

The carpenter agreed, but his heart wasn't in it. He took shortcuts, used inferior materials, and put in a half-hearted effort. In the end the final product was well short of his usual standards, a disappointing way to end his career.

When the job was finished, the employer came to inspect the work. After looking around, he handed the keys to the carpenter and said, "This is your house, it's my gift to you." The carpenter was shocked and embarrassed. If only he had known, he would have made sure that everything was perfect. If he had known the consequences, he would have demanded excellence from himself.

We're not that different. We go about our business, working as we see fit. Some with passion, some without caring. Some with excellence, some with low standards. Some with diligence, some without effort. We are all in the process of building our own lives. If we're not happy with what we see, perhaps it's a direct consequence of what we've been building over the years. The moral of the story is this: Build wisely!

The prophesy of Amos recounts the poor life-building done by the people of Israel. The timeframe is the post-Davidic period when Israel is divided into two kingdoms. The capital and worship center of the southern kingdom of Judah was Jerusalem. The capital of the northern kingdom of Israel was Samaria and the worship center was Bethel. There were some unholy things happening in Israel: dishonest merchants, abuse of the poor, court decisions being bought and sold, corruption in the priesthood, and, of course, idolatry.

God called Amos, a herdsman from the southern kingdom, to travel to Bethel in the northern kingdom to confront the people there about their sins. Amos went and talked about God holding a plumb line against Israel. He told the people that they were far "out of plumb" spiritually, far from where God wanted them to be. Amos warned that unless the people repented, they would suffer God's wrath.

Amos spoke of a locust plague that was coming (7:1-3) and a shower of fire (7:4-5), both of which God called off at Amos' intervention on behalf of Israel. But now, since Israel refused to repent, Amos prophesied that Israel's King Jeroboam II would die by the sword, the nation would be destroyed, and the people of Israel would go into exile. (By the way, all of this came to pass when the kingdom fell to the Assyrians in 722 B.C.!)

Not surprisingly, Amos' words did not sit well with the people. Amaziah, the chief priest of Bethel, didn't believe Amos. He reminded Amos that he was a foreigner, essentially telling him that if he wanted to prophesy, he should go back to Judah and tell his fellow Judahites about their sins, but that he should leave Israel alone. Amos responded by prophesying that the coming year would also be the worst year for Amaziah personally. Specifically, his wife would become a prostitute in the city, his sons and daughters would die by the sword, his land would be parceled out to others, and Amaziah himself would die in exile. Just like the people of Israel, Amaziah preferred to go his own way, ignoring God and God's prophet, and continuing to build a life that was "out of plumb."

Now, I'm no master carpenter, but I know you need two things when you build: a level and a plumb line. The message of Amos the prophet is that the people of Israel are not on the level and their lives are out of plumb spiritually. They are no longer behaving like the people God called them to be: a people devoted to God's will and purpose; a people established to be a blessing in the world through the establishment of justice, which is right relationship with God and neighbor, and the stranger who comes to the community.

The first six chapters of Amos detail the failures of God's people. God is very clear about just how far short the people fall from God's standards. They are so far from being level and plumb that God will no longer accept their worship or their offerings: *"I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of you fatted animals I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps"* 95:21-23). God is distressed, disappointed, and dissatisfied with the people's attitudes and behaviors. God wants nothing to do with them until they mend their ways.

What God does want is justice for all people and right living by God's people. God wants their life to be lived according to God's standards. *"Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream"* (5:24). Knowing that the people cannot achieve this on their own God promises two things for them to rebuild their lives: a divine level and a Godly plumb line.

A level is the yardstick thing with a bubble in the middle. It makes sure your cross beams are straight and not sloped to one side or the other. A level ensures your roof is on right, your deck is even, and your floors are flat. A level deals with the horizontal plane.

A plumb line deals with the vertical plane. It is basically a weighted string that you suspend in front of your wall, using gravity to test what is true or plumb. A plumb line ensures that your wall isn't tilted backward or forward.

For Christians, Jesus is both our divine level and our Godly plumb line. He is the embodiment of God's life, showing us the right way to live. In relationship with Jesus we find life that is true to God's original design. Jesus tells us over and over what level-living according to God's plumb line is:

- "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise" (Luke 3:10).
- Repent and follow Jesus (Matthew 4:17-19).
- "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 5:44).
- "Seek first the kingdom of God, and God's righteousness" (Matthew 6:33).
- "Do not judge so that you will not be judged" (Matthew 7:1).
- "Treat people the same way you want them to treat you" (Matthew 7:12).
- Love God and love your neighbor (Matthew 22:37-39).
- Make disciples and baptize (Matthew 28:19-20).
- Preach the gospel (Mark 16:15).
- Invite the poor (Luke 14:12-14).
- Love one another (John 13:34).
- Let your light shine so that others will see and give glory to God (Matthew 5:16).

That's a heady list! It's hard work living on God's level and sometimes we just cannot achieve it. The apostle Paul says we can never fully attain it; we will always fall short (Romans 3:23). Our human lives will never be truly level or completely plumb. But in Jesus we see one who met God's standards. He was *"holy, blameless, and undefiled, separate from*

sinners" (Heb.7:26). Jesus lived the perfectly obedient life we could never live. He is our justice and our righteousness. When God looks on us, God sees the justice and righteousness of Jesus imputed to us. Jesus is our level and our plumb line, the one to whom we look for inspiration, the one we aspire to emulate, the one who makes it possible to do better in the future than we did in the past.

Since Christ has come into the world, God will no longer overlook sin. There is no going back to the old way. It just won't do. God set the standard, and anything less is unacceptable. The good news is that God dealt with sin once and for all at the cross. The level and the plumb line, the horizontal and vertical planes, met perfectly in the Cross of Christ. God dealt with our fears and failures at the cross. There is nothing stopping us from living level and plumb with God anymore.

Knowing that our lives are not always level or plumb, but trusting in the cross of Jesus, we can believe the words God spoke through Amos: *"I will restore the fortunes of my people Israel, and they shall rebuild the ruined cities and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and drink their wine, and they shall make gardens and eat their fruit. I will plant them upon their land, and they shall never again be plucked up out of the land that I have given them, says the LORD your God"* (9:14-15).

For those who seek to live according to God's standard, who try to build lives on the level with their neighbors and plumb with God's Spirit, there is abundant life. Abundant life is not always easy, but it is always fulfilling, always affirming, always true.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, Master Carpenter, help me to build a life that is level and plumb, true to you and my neighbors. I thank You that I have been saved by grace through trusting in Jesus as my Lord and Savior. Help me to live in a manner that is pleasing to you: to walk in truth and love; to pray without ceasing; to give thanks in all things; to trust in Your Word; and to depend on You through time and into eternity. This I ask in Jesus name, AMEN.

Sources:

- Better Life Coaching Blog. "The Retiring Carpenter – A story about the Life We Build for Ourselves." <https://betterlifecoachingblog.com/2011/09/23/the-retiring-carpenter-a-story-about-the-life-we-build-for-ourselves-2/> Retrieved June 4, 2019.
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