

## Finding a Plumb Line

If you see a plumb line in a hardware store, it is really such a simple gadget it is hard to believe how important it can be to the getting everything right about a building project. Actually when you are building, or simply doing any type of remodeling task, you really don't need to purchase the tool it is so simple. This is one of the most simple ones and easy to put together for yourself. All you need is some string or any type of twine or line of the desired length that will support a sufficient weight to keep the line straight, a weight which can be anything at all depending upon the height that you need to measure....Wayne and I used some cord and an old Coke bottle at one point in our efforts to re-work the roof of my aunt's garage roof. Gravity keeps the line straight once you suspend it with the weight attached...such a simple concept to keep everything aligned. The Hebrew text from Amos today comes from the 7<sup>th</sup> chapter from the writings of this prophet and it isn't even the first vision that is recorded but the third and last before that confrontation he has with the priest at Bethel. The context of this passage is important because it gives meaning to what Amos has to say to the priest Amaziah and to us. I can easily imagine Amos standing in the public square preaching to the crowds gathered around him in a town in Northern Israel. What he says is being well received about transgressions, even at Bethel in the first two chapters. There he is talking about the transgressions of Damascus and Tyre and Edom and Moab...all their neighbors who are violating the ways of the Lord. He speaks of the Lord's justice which will come to them because of what they are doing. He even speaks of Judah's transgressions which have not kept the Lord's statutes. This is getting close to home, but they are probably still okay with this as it is not going to upset them for the Lord to "set a fire on Judah" according to Amos 2:5. That they are doing the same things does not seem to bother them. However, it seems that Amos does not stop at the border of Judah with his pronouncements about the coming of the Lord's judgments. It seems that Israel is included as well. To make matters worse Israel is not listening to the warnings that Amos has been sent to deliver. Israel is rejecting the judgments that they have not kept the ways of the Lord and are refusing to change. They are prosperous and content with their lives. It is at this point that we have the recorded visions of Amos, including the one about the plumb line. This rejection of the Lord's sending of the prophet to call them back to the ways they have been shown is the reason for this vision which seems so harsh. Amos is shown a vision of the Lord standing beside a wall built with a plumb line, with a plumb line in his hand. We are not exactly told what wall was built in the vision, but the implication is that it is not what was supposed to be built. It was supposed to be straight and solid, but evidently was not. "Then the Lord said, 'See, I am setting a plumb line in the midst of my people Israel; I will never again pass them by: the high places of Isaac shall be made desolate, and the sanctuaries of Israel shall be laid waste, and I will rise against the house of Jeroboam with the sword.'" Notice that God still claims the people...God is setting a plumb line

in the midst of my people. God is not giving up on them, but is measuring them against the expectations God had for them when they were chosen to be God's people. Those expectations were that they were to be formed into a nation living as a people guided by those commandments and statutes set down and given to them on that journey with God through the desert before they entered the land God gave them. This is land where they are now living where they were to remember to care for the widow and the orphan and the resident alien so prosperously. And they have totally forgotten all those things. Those are chief among the complaints issued in the first chapters of Amos against Israel and her neighbors about the lack of justice in the community for the vulnerable and the marginalized. So Amos is in Israel speaking the word God has given him to the people when Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, sends to the King Jeroboam and reports what Amos is saying. The introduction to the prophet Amos in chapter one makes clear the basis of the complaint the priest at the holy site at Bethel has against Amos. Amos 1:1 introduces him this way: "as one who was among the shepherds of Tekoka" which places his status as neither an Israelite nor one belonging to the priestly tribe of Levites, thus the sneering insult of "Seer" which is tossed at Amos as Amaziah begins addressing him. Amaziah, the priest at the holy site established at Bethel, which by the way literally means "house of God" tells Amos to leave Israel—he is not welcome here. "And Amaziah said to Amos, "O seer, go, flee away to the land of Judah, earn your bread there; but never prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king's sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom." It is so obvious that Amaziah is speaking out of his self-interest. He has sent a report to the king—he may be a priest at Bethel but he is a representative of the king, not of the Lord. He has forgotten that Bethel is a temple of the Lord one of the major shrines to the Lord in the nation state of Israel—it is not a temple of the kingdom and his self-interest cannot change to whom the temple really belongs. Amaziah may have changed his allegiance, but the Lord is still sovereign over the land and the people and has sent Amos to remind them. The Lord's voice is the one which will be heard at the end of the day, not Amaziah's—not Jeroboam's. "Then Amos answered Amaziah, 'I am no prophet, nor a prophet's son, but I am 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 was not a happy camper about his call or his visions. When you read his story, you get the feeling that he would have rather stayed at home tending to the flock—but God gave him this call and these visions. This mission God gave him did not allow him to stay at home. It did not matter that the criticism he levied was not well-received by those to whom he was sent. It was what God had told him the people needed to know and hear. They needed to know that their God was not pleased with them. In fact their God was angry with them, and rightly so. God's deep concern for human injustice is expressed in Amos in language of judgment and threat—but God was not angry for the sake of being angry, and God's anger here is not in opposition to God's love but actually because of the love God has for all. God's love demands righteousness, and breaches of God's call to justice and love cause God grief. As the

writings in the book of Amos show us, God is not indifferent to human suffering, oppression, and injustice. As the theologian James Cone writes: <sup>1</sup>“The wrath of God is the love of God in regard to the forces opposed to liberation of the oppressed.” God still calls them “my people”. He has sent Amos into their midst, and they are found wanting; they do not measure up. But Amos is sent to give the warning, to tell them how they are failing, what are their transgressions. What is the warning within this text for us when it seems too many people have trouble deciding where to find their “plumb line”? What is the source of our guidance in matters which decide public policy? Because the plumb line of the Lord was one which was one meant to create a nation that would be an example illustrating what the kingdom or reign of God would look like on earth. When God sends prophets among us—as God still does—do we listen—or do we seek our own self-interest and ignore their words as was often the case which scripture records for us? Denial of injustices in our midst does not make them go away; does not lessen in any way our complicity in the fact that they continue. The prophets of the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE spoke truth to power but were largely ignored. We as the disciples of Jesus know that grace abounds, but God’s desire for righteousness and justice also endures forever. We need to ground ourselves in the plumb line given by the guidance of the Lord’s ways of Love. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

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<sup>1</sup> Cone, James, “God is Black,” *Lift Every Voice: Constructing Christian Theologies from the Underside*, rev. and exp. Ed. Edited by Susan Brooks Thistlewaite and Mary Potter Engel (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1998), 108.