

I was talking with my daughter this week, and I was mentioning how important Amos was as a prophet. I noticed that her eyes were studiously blank.

Let me just say here that my daughter, Zoe, is one of the smartest people I know—far smarter than I am, and a PK to boot—so she’s pretty up on her bible. I don’t usually get to see her look --evasive. I have to say, I was enjoying it.

“So,” I asked her with a smile, “do you know who Amos is?”

“He’s in the Bible,” she said. “And I can spell his name.” She smiled.

I said to Zoe, “I bet if I asked you who said, “We will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream, I have a dream.. “ you’d know who it is. “Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.,” she said. And she was right—“but who is he paraphrasing?” I asked her? “That would be Amos.

But who was this man from the bible who has an easy name to spell?

Amos was a prophet. Amos was the first prophet to write down his message himself. He did this out of necessity, since he was sent home without being able to deliver it directly to the King.

It became a hit. People loved being able to read God’s prophecies, and all successive prophets followed Amos’ example, and wrote, or had someone write down, their prophesies: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Micah, Ezekial.

A little history: Israel under King David had been one kingdom, but Solomon wasn’t nearly as good a king as his father, and he began a war that split the kingdom into two: Israel to the north with Beth-El as it’s capital, and Judah to the south, where Jerusalem was the capital. Samaria—as you’ll recall from Jesus’ travels and stories, was in the northern kingdom. Nazareth was in the southern kingdom.

Now, Amos was from the southern Kingdom of Judah but was sent to preach in the northern Kingdom of Israel. He was sent by God to Israel in a time of relative peace and prosperity – but God wasn’t happy with their spiritual lives. God’s laws where being neglected. People made a show of ritual and worship, they professed to follow God’s laws, but there was an increased disparity between the very wealthy and the very poor. Not part of God’s plan.

- Amos was given the prophetic duty to tell Israel that right religion and faith in the One God is not contained in ritual, but in justice.
- But those who ruled in Israel felt that prayers and sacrifices made up for bad deeds, and whatever lack of fairness ensued.
- Amos said: economic justice is necessary to preserve the nation.
- Opponents said: sacrifices and offerings to God preserve the nation.

Enter God’s message today about the Plumb Line. We don’t typically use plumb lines anymore, because the modern LEVEL was invented. Both are used to determine if things are perpendicular. No one wants to construct a building that isn’t plumb, because if one puts together a dwelling that is not standing upright, it will fall down eventually. This is what God sent Amos to warn Israel. If Israel didn’t stop learning, it would fall.

God's people were to be upright. When we think of someone being upright, we think of them as being stalwart, steady, salt of the earth. Upright, within the context of the bible, as well as by the current definition in the dictionary, defines it to mean "upright, honest, and just. For example: *"He is an honest merchant who wouldn't cheat anyone."*

And what had Israel done that was not upright?

Though the kingdom had seen military success and prosperity, they were spiritually bankrupt. They had become famous for treasuring profit more than God. They oppressed the poor and crushed the needy, then sold them for profit. Justice was only for the ruling class. Honesty was not valued.

*So Amos relayed God's words:*

*"I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt-offerings and grain-offerings, I will not accept them; But let justice roll down [upon everyone] like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."*

And God continued to speak through Amos:

*Hear this, you that trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land. You say, 'When will the Sabbath be over so that we may offer wheat for sale? You --who want to practice deceit with false balances, buying the poor for silver.'*

God warned the people in Israel that there would be no rescue if the corruption didn't stop. He warned them that this behavior would lead to a poverty of spirit that would allow their country to be taken over and the King killed. God warned that they had to have somebody that could act like a plumb line in their midst.

And it didn't happen. They ignored the warning. And their country was overthrown and their king killed.

We are all called by God to be plumb lines in our world, upright and just. As children of God and followers of Jesus we must stand upright and fair in the midst of a world that seems to have lost its way.

And now, in our world, in our time-- 200,000 people in Maine lack enough food to provide adequate nutrition. Systemic racism affects our people of color, our indigenous people. The gulf between the haves and have nots has never been wider, and our the world is fixated on money, not God and neighbor.

And we are given this opportunity to be upright, to BE the plumb line. To be the honest and the fair people in the world. To speak out for the sick and the friendless and the needy. To be God's hands, God's heart, God's voice.

We are not called to sit back and remain idle when the world is teetering and ready to fall. We are given the job to be its plumb line. And "we don't think ourselves into this new way of living—we live our way into this new way of thinking."\*

Let's not let the world shape us. Let's be God's plumb line. Amen.

\*Parker Palmer