

July 11, 2021
“What Do You See?”
Amos 7:7-15
Pastor Tim Emmett-Rardin

Last week we heard from the prophet Ezekiel, the priest-turned-prophet addressing a community in exile. “O mortal, I am sending you to the people of Israel, to a nation of rebels who have rebelled against me; they and their ancestors have transgressed against me to this very day. . . . Whether they hear or refuse to hear . . . they shall know that there has been a prophet among them.”

Now rewind about 160 years or so, and we hear this morning (as Amy read for us) from the earliest of the eighth-century BCE prophets – the shepherd-turned-prophet Amos, preceding Hosea, Isaiah and Micah. Historically speaking, we're talking roughly 760 BCE, this places Amos within the reigns of two kings and a divided kingdom that initially split following the death of King Solomon around 930 BCE.

King Jeroboam II, ruled the northern kingdom of Israel, and King Uzziah, the southern kingdom of Judah. Both enjoyed relatively long, peaceful and prosperous reigns.

Unlike Ezekiel and other prophets in the Hebrew scriptures, there is no dramatic call story for Amos. There is no back-story, only a single verse letting us know that he was “among the shepherds of Tekoa” in Judah. The text immediately dives into his prophesy – and to be sure, the message of Amos pulls no punches. It is uncompromising and unrelenting.

“The time is surely coming, says the Lord GOD.” God is not happy, and Amos makes it abundantly clear why:

Chapter 2, verse 6: “Thus says the LORD: For three transgressions of Israel, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment; because they sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals – they who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth, and push the afflicted out of the way . . .”

Chapter 5, verse 7: “Ah, you that turn justice to wormwood, and bring righteousness to the ground!” And verse 11-12: “Therefore because you trample on the poor and take

from them levies of grain, you have built houses of hewn stone, but you shall not live in them; you have planted pleasant vineyards, but you shall not drink their wine."

Chapter 6, verse 12: "But you have turned justice into poison and the fruit of righteousness into wormwood . . ." And chapter 8, verse 4: ". . . you that trample on the needy and bring ruin to the poor of the land . . ."

This is indeed a prosperous time for both Israel and Judah, but the prosperity is reserved for the wealthy elite at the expense of the poor. And in such a social and political context, Amos further reveals God's disgust for superficial religion and empty ritual. Here, chapter 5, verses 21 and following: "I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your 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."

And then, most famously: "But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."

The message is clear as an ever-flowing stream. What makes God unhappy, what makes God angry, what God rejects, is IN-justice. And UN-righteousness. The perversion of justice – what "love looks like in public," as Cornel West puts it – AND the betrayal of right relationship with God. The corruption of God's intention for beloved community where everyone has what they need to live, where everyone has enough. Where, as the Psalmist puts it in our other reading this morning, "Steadfast love and faithfulness . . . meet" and where "righteousness and peace . . . kiss each other."

Without righteousness, there can be no justice. And without justice, there can be no peace. No justice, no peace.

Which brings us to the plumb line. You may or may not know what a plumb line is. Also called a plummet, it's a cord or string with lead – a non-magnetic weight – attached to one end. Used in construction, by carpenters and painters, a plumb line relies on gravity to determine a true vertical line from top to bottom. Its measurement remains

objectively straight no matter what, so that any work that doesn't line up with it will be crooked, out of alignment.

The Hebrew word generally translated as plumb line, *anak*, appears only once in the Bible: "This is what (God) showed me: the Lord was standing beside a wall built with a plumb line, with a plumb line in . . . hand. And the LORD said to me, "Amos, what do you see?" And I said, "A plumb line." 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."

Amos has two previous visions, described in chapter 7, where he successfully persuades God to relent punishment and give the people another chance. But not so with this third vision.

The portrayal here in Amos, and elsewhere in scripture, of a wrathful and destructive, even violent, God, is theologically troubling to say the least. And worthy of reflection and conversation. But it's important that we not lose sight of Amos' underlying theological message. What God cares most about, and calls us to care most about, is justice and righteousness. And so what angers God, and should anger us enough to do something about it, is injustice and unrighteousness. The standard by which our social, political and religious realities should be measured, the standard for our collective good is set, and was set by God a long, long time ago. Israel and Judah are woefully, and Amos means woefully, out of plumb with God's vision.

And the LORD said to me, "Amos, what do you see?" And I said, "A plumb line."
What do you see?

There's a story about two friends who were walking down the sidewalk of a busy city street during rush hour. There was all sorts of noise in the city; car horns honking, feet shuffling, people talking! And amid all this noise, one of the friends turned to the other and said, "I hear a cricket."

"No way," her friend responded. "How could you possibly hear a cricket with all of this noise? You must be imagining it. Besides, I've never seen a cricket in the city."

"No, really, I do hear a cricket. I'll show you." She stopped for a moment, then led her friend across the street to a big cement planter with a tree in it. Pushing back some leaves she found a little brown cricket.

"That's amazing!" said her friend. "You must have super-human hearing. What's your secret?"

"No, my hearing is just the same as yours. There's no secret," the first woman replied. "Watch, I'll show you." She reached into her pocket, pulled out some loose change, and threw it on the sidewalk. Amid all the noise of the city, everyone within thirty feet turned their heads to see where the sound of the money was coming from.

"See," she said. "It's all a matter of what you're listening for."

What are you listening for, and so what do you ACTUALLY hear? What are you looking for, and so what do you ACTUALLY see? Notice? What are your standards of measurement? Jesus puts it another way, "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." For where your individual and collective treasures are, where your values are, where your standards are, there will be also your hearts, your eyes, your ears, your hands, your lives, your plans, your institutions, your laws, your protocols, your policies, your budgets.

What do you see?

As a people, as a society, we will not, we CANNOT, see injustice unless we know clearly and consistently what justice looks like. We will not, we CANNOT see injustice – much less name it, call it out and confront it, as Amos does, speaking truth to power, rejected by the political and religious authorities of the day, told to get out and take his message elsewhere – unless we see the plumb line. Unless we see the plumb line!

We see what we want to see, so where are your blind spots? What do you actually notice amidst all the noise, all the distractions?

What do you see when a white cop chokes a black man to death in the street? Or shoots and kills a black child, holding a toy gun, to death in a park? Or when white residents gun down a black man jogging in their neighborhood?

What do you see when migrant children are separated from their parents at the border? Or when immigrant families live in fear, threatened by ICE deportation raids?

What do you see when school quality depends on your zip code or your pocket book, when it's easier to get a gun than it is an education. When one in three black men will be imprisoned at some point in their lives?

And what do you see when daily headlines announce yet another person killed on the streets of Philadelphia, nearly 300 already this year? Or yet another mass shooting?

What do you see when churches continue to teach and preach conditional love *for*, and close their doors and their pulpits and their marriage ceremonies *to*, queer and trans children of God?

What do you see when women still make only 82 cents to the dollar compared to men? When the median black household holds just ten percent of the wealth of the median white household?

What do you see when nearly 100 million people are displaced from their homes as a result of persecution, conflict, violence, human-rights violations, poverty, hunger.

What do you see when corporate CEOs bankroll millions, hundreds of millions, while front-line workers can't take a sick day, can't afford health insurance, can't pay their rent, can't feed their children.

What do you see when 81 percent of women report experiencing some form of sexual harassment and/or assault in their lifetime?

What do you see when the United States spends more on military defense than the next 10 countries combined?

What do you see when polar ice caps melt, when wildfires rage, when hurricane seasons stretch, when high-temperature records are shattered, when plant and animal species go extinct?

What do you see? What do you see?!

It's overwhelming! We are so, so, so far out of plumb with God's vision. But Amos says, the God of Jubilee says, SEE the plumb line. Zoom in on it! It's right there, and it's been there all along. See the plumb line. And BE the plumb line wherever you can.

With that vision and in that spirit, I close with this poem from Langston Hughes:

*I look at the world
From awakening eyes in a black face—
And this is what I see:
This fenced-off narrow space
Assigned to me.*

*I look then at the silly walls
Through dark eyes in a dark face—
And this is what I know:
That all these walls oppression builds
Will have to go!*

*I look at my own body
With eyes no longer blind—
And I see that my own hands can make
The world that's in my mind.
Then let us hurry, comrades,
The road to find.*

Friends, for clear-eyed vision, naming and eliminating our blind spots, for attentiveness, for compassion, for strength, for boldness and courage, for fortitude and resiliency, the road to find.

For the sake of the planet and all of God's people, may we see with new eyes, may we speak up and step up with renewed and softened hearts. And together, may we find what we're looking for – the world that's been in God's mind since the very beginning.

May it be so.