

THE PLUMB LINE

Amos 7:7-17

How would you relate Presidents of the United States? If a president defeated in war our enemies, then led the nation into a time of peace and prosperity, how would you rate him? He also encouraged the arts. He would probably be in the upper ranks of the presidents, unlike a Franklin Pierce who was said to be drunk much of time or Ulysses Grant who was surrounded by corrupt government officials.

Jereboam II, King of Israel, ruled with Jehoash from 793 to 782 BC and then as sole ruler from 782 to 753 BC. The Old Testament book of 2 Kings says this about his realm:

The LORD had seen how bitterly everyone in Israel, whether slave or free, was suffering; there was no one to help them. And since the LORD had not said he would blot out the name of Israel from under heaven, he saved them by the hand of Jeroboam son of Jehoash. As for the other events of Jeroboam's reign, all he did, and his military achievements, including how he recovered for Israel both Damascus and Hamath, which had belonged to Judah, are they not written in the book of the annals of the kings of Israel?

Jereboam II ruled the northern tribes of Israel. After the death of King Solomon Israel divided into two kingdoms—"Israel" in the north and "Judah" in the south. Archaeologists have uncovered the ruins of his capital in Samaria. The discoveries there confirm what 2 Kings says of his realm. In our world today Jereboam would be given two thumbs up.

Yet, this is not what the prophet Amos saw. He was given this vision from God:

Then the Lord said, "Look, I am setting a plumb line among my people Israel; I will spare them no longer. The high places of Isaac will be destroyed and the sanctuaries of Israel will be ruined; with my sword I will rise against the house of Jeroboam."

Why such a negative view? You put a plumb line to Jeroboam's Israel, and it looks pretty good. But God looks at the inside. Underlying all the peace and prosperity were two big problems: people didn't love God, and they didn't love their fellow humans. Amos tells them:

You brag about your freewill offerings—boast about them, you Israelites, for this is what you love to do," declares the Sovereign LORD.

He also says:

There are those who hate the one who upholds justice in court and detest the one who tells the truth. You levy a straw tax on the poor and impose a tax on their grain.

Their religion was about outwardly performing the sacrifices to God, going through the motions, and by that expecting that they were good enough for God. There was little trust in God to lead their lives, so the result was that they didn't serve God by serving their fellow human beings.

So how do we relate to this? We can easily substitute the United States for Jereboam II's kingdom. We live in prosperity and use more than our share of the world's resources. But for all our prosperity, what do we make of the images of sex and violence in our popular culture, the decline of church attendance, the assaults on the value of life through abortion and euthanasia, and new ways of looking at marriage and sexual identity? What God tells Amos about Jeroboam's Israel can sure sound like the warning we hear about the United States:

The high places of Isaac will be destroyed and the sanctuaries of Israel will be ruined; with My sword I will rise against the house of Jeroboam.

But Amos isn't talking about the United State or any country or political entity today. He was talking about God's people. Today that means the Church, you and me.

How do we look compared to the plumb line? We pay our taxes, keep our lawns mowed, bring our children to Sunday School, and stay out of trouble. That may be pretty straight to us. But that is like trying to make something level by our eyesight alone and as we stand on a slope and are not level ourselves. What is seen by God and His plumb line?

Think of how much effort we put into helping our children to be successful. Compare that to the amount of effort we put into helping our children be faithful to God. How much of our daily concerns are about helping other people compared to making

ourselves comfortable? Are we more concerned with facing evil or keeping our lives peaceful and quiet? So often our priorities show that God is pushed to the side. That may not seem very crooked in this world, but it does when God's plumb line is put next to it.

Yet in addition, there are two ways to look good to the plumb line. One is to build straight, but the other is to not build much at all. Are we the former or the latter? Perhaps we are not doing a lot of bad, "crooked" things. But are we doing much good? But the God who holds the plumb line against our lives is also the one who offers us a new one. Listen to what we hear about the coming of Jesus in Luke 3:

Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for Him. Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth. And all people will see God's salvation.

What we make crooked God made straight in His Son, Christ Jesus. And He continually makes us straight through the daily forgiveness He gives us in Jesus. God sets His plumb line against us as we come to confess our sin. We see how crooked it is, not to dwell on that, but to move us to turn to Him for forgiveness. Otherwise we end up convincing ourselves that we aren't all that bad. Then we miss out on the peace and joy that comes from forgiveness. Then we begin to trust in ourselves rather than God. Then we can end up like King Jeroboam and the priest Amaziah who told Amos to go home because they didn't want to hear what God had to say. But God gives us continual opportunity to confess and let Him make us truly straight.

The nation of Israel did not admit their crookedness. Like bad construction they collapsed. But God promises to His people did not. For all the bad news Amos told them we hear in these words how his prophesy ended:

"The days are coming," declares the LORD, "when the reaper will be overtaken by the plowman and the planter by the one treading grapes. New wine will drip from the mountains and flow from all the hills, and I will bring my people Israel back from exile. They will rebuild the ruined cities and live in them. They will plant vineyards and drink their wine; they will make gardens and eat their fruit. I will plant Israel in their own land, never

again to be uprooted from the land I have given them," says the LORD your God.

That is all true for us in Christ Jesus, our Lord.

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July 15, 2018
Memorial Lutheran Church and Student Center
Ames, Iowa 50014