

**Proper 10, Year C**

Amos 7:7-17

Psalm 82

Colossians 1:1-14

Luke 10:25-37

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Good Shepherd Church

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**The Plumb Line***God of the prophets, bless the prophets' heirs!*

Denis Wortman

The Hymnal 1982, Hymn 359

Some years ago at a 12-step convention, what's called a "round-up," a San Francisco Al-Anon group performed a fabulous dramatic musical presentation about *co-dependence*. While that sounds pretty boring, this little show was anything but.

The writers had personified the concepts, and costumed each concept in a way that could only happen in San Francisco. Each character sang a full musical piece; insightful, musically skillful, and lyrically sophisticated.

And of course, *the set...*

From this drama, I most remember the character Denial, a flamboyant cross-dressed woman who spent most of her time ignoring what was difficult and pretending everything was really very very nice. Her denial theme song was an operatic, "Don't Bring Me Bad News."

She only talked of pleasant things, and her life seemed cheerful. Bad news made her faint until the messenger went away, and she could return to only thinking about happy things, while disparaging the messenger as that unpleasant man, angry that he should intrude on her pleasant life.

This dramatic performance was magnificent. Of course, because it was anonymous, it was never recorded.

None of us likes receiving bad news. I guess that's why they call it bad news. And some survival mechanism in our brains prompts us to take in bad news only when something is an immediate threat to ourselves or someone we love, and sometimes, not even then. If we can't see something right now, if it isn't right in our faces, or sometimes even if it is, we really don't want to know too much about it. We rebuff it with angry or sarcastic remarks to the messenger.

And in fairness, we get weary of warnings about catastrophes, *especially* if we might have to change our behavior to avert them.

And we do constantly get receive warnings about: the environment; the water, or the air, or damaging waste in the soil. We hear about food safety problems, our own health or stinging and deadly health care policies, harmful products,

worrisome politics and the direction of the country,  
or our social relationships with each others, and the world,  
and more.

We say, “OK, OK, I know, I know. I’m just living the best I can.”  
And, “There’s nothing I can do.”  
Or, in a classic motto of denial we say, “It’s just not that bad.”

Today we read a text from the prophet Amos. **Amos** had bad news.

Amos was a herder of cattle and a dresser of sycamore trees,  
He came from the city of Tekoa in the Southern Kingdom of Judah.  
He was not an official prophet from the Prophets’ Guild, and prophet WAS a career,  
nor was he a priest from the ordained priesthood, another, separate, career.

He wasn’t trained or ordained by the ‘church,’ so to speak.  
but a somewhat rough man, with some jagged edges in the smoothness of his speech.  
He had been ordained only by God, not the religious institution  
And ordination *only by God* is not a good professional recommendation at all,  
especially not good enough for the religious professionals who believed they controlled all  
messages from God.

In Amos time, two different states made up Palestine. Really, two different countries, Israel  
in the north and Judah in the south. Each had its own king and military, and the terrain in  
each country was unique – like northern and southern California.  
We think of the present country of Israel as dry and rocky, and it is in the south,  
but the north is verdant and cool much of the year. It even snows there.

In Amos time, peace reigned in both Judah and Israel, and the two countries were actually in  
cordial relationship with each other. They even had alliances with Syria. Everything seemed  
in order in the Northern Kingdom.

BUT there was a family problem in Israel.

The rich were getting richer. The poor were becoming poorer and more numerous.  
And “nice,” socially legal injustice had become a way of life.  
I guess you could call it white collar unethical crime.

Now, Amos sees visions and hears words from God, which didn’t help his credibility,  
and today’s text gives us one of the visions that Amos received.

God appears to Amos and tells him to go from the south, from Judah where he lives,  
up to the Northern Kingdom to warn Israel, specifically the wealthy, that God is not happy  
with the North, and that disaster is coming to their state.

In the little piece of Amos we read today, it isn’t revealed exactly why God plans to cream  
Israel, but the reading just beyond today’s text, we hear what is making God so angry.  
What do you think that might be? I’ll talk about that just in a minute.

This section we read, part of Chapter 7, does say that God will use a vertical line, a plumb line, which falls from the top directly to the earth, as a guide against which all will stand to compare their own righteousness against the upright standard of God's ways. I never quite understood this plumb line thing as it had to do with God, although I remember from childhood my father using a plumb bob, a cord with a pointy metal weight on the end, to make sure his construction projects were straight and square.

In the bible here, the idea is that the plumb line marks the legal and ethical standards God has established for us. It is upright, and always at a right angle to the earth. All beings can (or will, or must) use this standard to measure their own lives against what God has given us and asks of us, and for the people of Israel, given and asked by covenant, by contract, between God and the people. The plumb line represents the standards the divine holds for us.

Israel has broken their covenant with God in several ways, and she's not standing very upright when standing against the plumb line. She has seriously bent and crooked places.

Some are listed in the next chapters, beyond what we heard today. This is why God is angry with Israel:

In a vision, Amos hears God say to the people of Israel,

"You trample on the needy and bring to ruin the poor of the land,  
you say, 'How soon will holy days be over and I can get back to scheming?  
You make the ephah (bushel) small and the (gold coin) shekel great and  
practice deceit with false balances,  
buying the poor for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals,  
and selling even the sweepings of wheat [as food]."

God continues:

"And finally, there will be famine,  
Not only for bread and water,  
But for hearing the truth of God."

Continue in this way, says God, and the country will be truly impoverished in every way.  
Then your king, Jeraboam will be killed by the sword.

Well, you can imagine how well this information is received by the people in power in the Northern kingdom.

They quickly and inaccurately determine that it isn't the information that's a problem, it's the messenger. Don't bring them bad news.  
They don't want it, they don't hear it, and they won't receive it.

The king's priest, Amaziah told the king about Amos,  
that Amos said the king would die by the sword.  
Both the priest and the king view this as heresy and a problem with the messenger, with Amos.

In addition to the bad news, there was another problem,  
as there had been for some time,

over who actually had the spiritual authority to make these kinds of proclamations, whether it was the career priests or the career prophets. But they could come together on this one thing: It wasn't Amos.

The king and the priest both strongly recommend that Amos go home to Judah and eat his bread there, meaning ply his prophesy trade there. They sure weren't paying for that kind of information.

The kings, priests and prophets, who are among the wealthy, really don't want this kind of troublemaking in their country. As far as they're concerned, everything is fine, the country is prosperous (meaning the *wealthy* are getting richer) and business is looking up.

They're not about to hear such unpleasant news from this crabby prophet from out of town. Amos has to explain that he's *not* a Guild prophet, *not* a professional, *not* getting paid for this; he just came up at God's request to warn them.

But

They don't want it, and they don't need it.

They don't care how the poor are doing,  
they're going to get what they can from them,  
raise their costs and reduce their wages.

Continue to change the balance of power and income in the direction of the wealthy and call it prosperous.

Get what they need in the cheapest way possible from the people who make the lowest wages, and call it a good deal. That's what matters, a good deal. No matter the quality of the lives the children and adults who make products that are a good deal. They got a deal, and life is good.

Public leaders, corrupted by indulgence, were living lives of relative ease, worried about staying in their well paid positions, unconcerned with the problems of the poor.

And courts of law were used to serve the vested interests of the commercial class.

Religion offered no real word or action of protest, just like now.

Passing a resolution or loudly proclaiming a position against these practices does not solve the problem.

It is easy for human beings to be lulled to sleep by peace and affluence.

Abundance can reduce our spiritual receptivity, devotion, and faith.

Many of us have witnessed this in ourselves. When things are going well, we don't so much need God. In fact, sometimes during our greatest affluence, and busy-ness, we are most the most spiritually poor, blind to the problems of people around us, and most naked for who we are.

Social injustice with abundance for some has a destructive nature about it for everyone; merchant, professional, those barely scraping by with substandard food and living conditions,  
and for a country as a whole.

As it happened, a generation after Amos, a new and aggressive king came into power in Assyria near the end of the reign of Jeroboam, the king that Amos was reporting to.

This Assyrian king's goal was to incorporate Syria and Palestine, especially the Northern Kingdom of Israel, into his empire, an undertaking he had already started.

His successors invaded the Northern Kingdom of Israel and carried the people into exile. The history of the Northern Kingdom came to an end forever,

and the prophecies of Amos were fulfilled not 40 years after he made them. Israel had become too complacent and vulnerable, and finally she fell.

We like to hear from the God who says, “Comfort, comfort, my people,” and that divine being is present to us.

Yet we also have some divine ethical standards of behavior that it is not to our benefit to ignore. Many we try to not see, if they interfere with our current way of life.

Many of the commands of God provide advice for living, they’re cause and effect, rather than meaningless directives, or just rules.

These standards and directives are for our *benefit*, individually and collectively, not just rules to give us grief.

‘Honor your father and mother that it might go well for you’.

Honor your father and mother and it is more likely that things will go well for you in the life you have been given.

If we care for one another, we will do better as a people.

If we stop to care for the wounded man on the road to Jericho,

even if it means we will destroy our new shoes,

even if it means people will view us as dirty, naïve, gullible

even if it means it we’ll use up our money for the month getting him checked into that hospital we take him to,

even if it means we won’t make it to church and we’re the preacher (for example),

and we KNOW that some people in the congregation will be angry that

we didn’t choose another way that would get us to church on time;

nevertheless, it will be better for all of us if we stop to give that care.

In the reading from Colossians for today Paul says, “... We have not ceased praying for you and asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of God’s will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you may lead lives worthy of God, fully pleasing, as you *bear fruit in every good work...*”

Supposing God were here today in this congregation holding a plumb line for us to approach one by one, as we stand next to this standard of ethics it would be made clear to us how our lives and thoughts compared to the ways we know we would best be living. Supposing our church as a whole approached that plumb line and took a look at who we are as a congregation compared to what God’s ethics holds up for in the reign of God.

If we perceive that unwelcome news has been brought to us, we don’t have to push it away.

We can look it in the face and evaluate our lives within what the divine has shown us. We can always change what might need changing without fear.

We don’t need denial. We can hear bad news because it, too, may be good news—The divine always seeks loving good for us. This may be the catalyst for a change that gives us real joy and fulfillment. Of course, we’ll also know where we’re walking upright against these standards; we can hear good news, too, and accept it fully.

There is cause and effect, and more than once we’ve experienced the consequences of our own less than ideal ways of living. We needn’t fear, though.

I don't know if you remember or even saw it, but in Harry Potter movies there is a method of communication called a Howler. You receive a letter and when you open it, whoever is angry with you screams out the message.

**“What did you think you were doing taking out that car? You could have...”**  
and on like that.

God usually doesn't send us Howlers (I know I don't want one), except maybe in the form of news we'd rather not get. We can keep our hearts and minds open, hard as it is sometimes, so we can be helped to live by the standards of love itself. And we are Amos' heirs, too, talking and working toward the standards of the plumb line.

Shed your oppressive denial. We are surrounded by a loving and forgiving God, full of care for all people.

And that Love itself is the essence of the plumb line against which we stand to look at our uprightness and crookedness.

It's all for loving kindness and forgiveness that can, with the Holy, help us renew the face of the earth. This isn't the smarmy kind of love, but the love that works for good for all.