

## Minor Prophets

### The Plumbline Frankton – 1/10/16

Scripture: Amos 7.7-15 Plumbline and Prophecy

Proposition: It is our job to continually test ourselves and the church to see how true to plumb we/they are and to have the fortitude to call for corrections when we/they are out of plumb.

To set the stage for the prophet [SLIDE] Amos, we need to remember that at this time Israel had actually split into two separate kingdoms – Judah in the south and Israel in the north. At the time of Amos, great things were happening in Israel. The nation was getting stronger by the day. It was used to fighting wars and winning. Its economy was very good. People had a feeling that everything was going well. They could look out on the horizon of the future and see nothing but good things for the country. After all, they were a part of God's chosen people, surely nothing terrible could happen to them. God would take care of them. But unfortunately for them, not everything was going as well as they thought, and Amos saw this when he went to Israel.

So who was Amos? Amos lived about 750 years before Jesus in the Southern Kingdom of Judah near Bethlehem. But God called Amos to be a prophet to Israel, the Northern Kingdom. (Not a call I would want.) When Amos went to Israel, God showed him what the Israelites couldn't see. Amos saw Israel through the eyes of God. The nation had developed a pretty low moral base. There was a lot crime and prostitution was abundant. There was social injustice as well. Yes, there were a lot of people who had money, prestige, and power but there were a lot more people who didn't. The rich had lifestyles that the poor people could hardly believe: mansions, material goods, slaves, anything that money can buy. (Is any of this sounding familiar?)

But the country thinks that it is the next best thing to sliced bread. The mood of the people is that everything is going so well because they are such good people. The country is God's chosen people so it can do what it wants to do because God wants it that way. They think God is committed to the nation of Israel regardless of what the nation does. They considered themselves immune to disaster because God was on their side. So because of these facts, the Israelites are only giving lip service to the covenant between God and Israel that said that God would be their God and they would be his people. It was a mutually exclusive covenant. God would not choose others and Israel would not follow other gods. Israel had failed on its end of the covenant. They had begun to worship other gods. They followed some of the religious laws, but they were not looking out for poor, the resident aliens and the widows like it says to do in Exodus. It is against this backdrop of moral corruption, social injustice and idolatry that Amos is called by God to prophesy - to speak God's word - in Israel, where he is a foreigner, against Israel.

Our scripture starts with the third of five visions that God gives Amos. I wanted to specifically talk about this third vision due to the reaction it gets from the religious establishment in Israel. So, let's look at the vision. Amos is in Israel and relating his vision to the folks there. In his vision, God is standing next to a wall that had been built with a [SLIDE] plumb line. The plumb line was a tool that carpenters used to make sure a wall being built wall is straight up and down, perpendicular to the world. That's called being plumb. The plumb line would be held against the wall and the wall set up so that it was plumb. Also, after the wall had been there a while, as the

## Minor Prophets

house or building aged, the plumb line could be used to see if the wall remained plumb or did it become skewed. Did it get out of alignment, out of true?

In the vision, God is standing next to this wall that had been built using a plumb line. That meant that the wall had been made straight and true. This wall represents Israel. At first, it had been faithful, true to God. Now God was using that plumb line to see if the wall, the country, was still plumb, was still true. God asks Amos what he sees. Amos answers 'a plumb line.' Amos probably knows what's coming next. God says that he is setting the plumb line among his people and he tells Amos that they have failed the plumb line test, they are no longer straight and true, and that judgment will come. In other words, they have failed to uphold their end of the covenant – worshipping the one true God. God tells Amos that he will destroy Israel's pagan shrines and that the house of the king will fall by the sword. And we know that all Amos sees comes true about 30 years later when the Assyrians do battle with Israel and take over the kingdom.

The next few verses report the reaction of the church to Amos' vision. We read what the High Priest, who is top dog at the national temple in Bethel, did in response to Amos' prophesy. It's important to understand that the High Priest is the king's personal priest. So, the High Priest sends the king a little note saying that Amos has prophesied the king's death by the sword, which is not what Amos said. He adds that the nation doesn't need to hear this kind of talk, obviously thinking that it will provoke the king against Amos. And if that wasn't enough, the High Priest confronts Amos directly. He calls Amos a seer. (We could substitute the words palm-reader, tarot card reader, crystal ball gazer or tea leaf reader.) Then he tells Amos to pack up and go home to where he belongs, where he could make a living prophesying against Israel because the people of Judah would pay good money to hear that. (Judah and Israel were never on great terms.) Then he says that Amos should never again come to Bethel and preach these words because Bethel is too high and mighty a sanctuary to hear such uncouth and obviously untrue words.

Can you see what has happened to the High Priest? The High Priest has gone from being a man called by God to a man answering to the king. He has gone from a man who speaks God's word to a man who speaks what the king wants to hear. He has gone from a man who tries to keep his flock near to God to a man who wants to keep himself near the king. He has gone from a lonely voice crying in the wilderness "Repent" to a voice speaking from the biggest and most influential pulpit in the kingdom. The High Priest has gone from God's priestly change agent to the chaplain of the status quo.

And we in the church sit here and question how the High Priest couldn't see this change in himself. How could a man of God make such a gross error? We question why he can't understand that Amos was really speaking for God. We question why he couldn't see the sins of the people of Israel and preach against them himself. We question how he could have let his guard down and become so much like the society that he was supposed to change. How could he go from priestly change agent to chaplain of the status quo? I want to ask you how today's church can avoid the High Priest complex – that of becoming what you speak against, that of wanting to keep the status quo. I think there are a few answers to that question.

We need to constantly remind ourselves who is the [SLIDE] Creator and who are the created. We need to constantly remind ourselves who has all the answers and who has all the questions. We need to constantly remind ourselves who is God and who is not. We have to remind ourselves

## Minor Prophets

who is omnipotent, omnipresent, and omniscient and who is not. Sometimes we think we have the answers to the world's problems. Just ask us, we can solve anything. Gun violence: we've got an answer for that. Racial tension: we've got an answer for that. Education reform: we've got an answer for that. Corruption, drugs, welfare: we've got an answer for that. The problem is, we can't solve everything. God has the answers to the world's problems and can solve all our problems. The best we can hope to be is the traffic cop directing people to the one who does have the answers – God. We have to remind ourselves that we are the ones that do the worshipping – we are not deserving of worship. Only God deserves to be worshipped. To keep from becoming keepers of the status quo we need to remember who is God and who is not.

We need to remember that the [SLIDE] church gets its life from God and gets its sustenance from God. We need to remember that God created the church. He gave Jesus Christ to be the head of the church and he gave the Holy Spirit to be the provoker of the church. The church was not started by some civic group or some government agency. We need to remember that we owe our allegiance to God – not government. We owe our allegiance to God – not some civic group. We owe our allegiance to God – not some political structure. This is where the High Priest got in trouble – he thought he owed more allegiance to the king than to God. God has more truth and more strength than any government bureaucracy. To keep from becoming a keeper of the status quo, we need to remember that the church gets its very life from God.

We need to [SLIDE] keep our focus where it belongs – on others and not on ourselves. It's not about you! That's the whole crux of the theology of the Exodus – take our eyes off ourselves and concentrate on those who need help - take care of the widows, the orphans and the resident aliens. Christ expanded that thought to include those who are bleeders, blind, handicapped, lepers, paralyzed, and include even those that we consider our enemies, tax collectors and Samaritans. We have to remember that through God's eyes, justice isn't just about punishment of the evil-doers. God's justice includes an equal distribution of goods and services so that all God's children have the basic needs covered. To keep from becoming keepers of the status quo, we need to keep our focus where it belongs – on others and not ourselves.

We need to [SLIDE] relate work and worship. In other words, we need to take the theology that we hear and study and learn while we sit in the pews and classrooms and take it out to the streets and cafes and households of our corner of the world. Our actions speak so loud that those around us can't hear what we are saying. Action is required. We can learn all the theology we want. We can understand all the nuances of our Bible. We can understand why John Wesley set the rules of the Methodist church like he did. We can even study and understand the current Book of Discipline, our current rulebook. BUT, if we don't take all our knowledge and all our faith and all our beliefs and put them into action, then we are just a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. As James writes in his epistle: *Faith without works is dead.* [2.14] To keep from becoming keepers of the status quo, we need to relate work and worship.

How do you think we're doing? If God set the plumb line on our ministries today, would we be plumb or have we lost our straightness. Which person are you in the story? Are you more like the High Priest, the priest of the status quo, or are you more like Amos, called by God to speak God's word? [SLIDE] Status quo or rocking the boat?

