

## **“Out of Plumb”**

*Minor Prophets, Major Implications – sermon #5*

Amos 7:7-15

There is an old red barn in Mikado, Michigan, just down the road from my family’s hunting camp. You’ve probably seen barns like these before. At one time, it was a grand, majestic structure, symbolizing the prosperity of the farm. Now, years later, it is empty, leaning and unstable. Each time my family drives by, we try to predict when it will completely fall down. Each year, it leans more and more, to the point where its collapse seems eminent.

Most of us are alarmed when we see buildings whose walls are not vertical. Take for example the infamous Leaning Tower of Pisa. I first saw it in 1999, when it was hooked up to massive cables to prevent it from toppling. It seemed impossible that this tower was still standing. I once read a book called “Tilt: A Skewed History of the Tower of Pisa.” The book says that the Italians tried first to build the Tower straight, but its foundation did not account for the unstable soil beneath it. Instead of tearing down the tower and starting over, they compensated by building higher levels off-center, trying to counteract the lean. Multiple layers of the tower are built at progressively steeper angles. The result is an iconic structure, but architecturally very dumb. The Italian government spent millions to stabilize it in its current, skewed position, to preserve it as a valuable tourist attraction. They memorialized the mistake that left them with a leaning tower. Even the flag pole at the top isn’t straight.

Now, a leaning tower might be amusing for a tourist attraction, but it is not safe to actually enter it. We want to live in safe, stable, upright buildings. And if

you want a building to be safe, you need a good foundation and a building inspector to tell you when there is trouble.

The prophets in the Hebrew Scriptures were like building inspectors for their countries. Their job was to tell the people when they were “out of line” with God’s expectations, when they were no longer on solid ground with the Lord. Through the prophets, God gave God’s people a chance to see how their spiritual building was leaning and ready to topple over if they didn’t change their ways.

A few weeks ago we started this sermon series called “Minor Prophets, Major Implications.” As I mentioned, we call these twelve books (Hosea to Malachi) “the Minor Prophets” not because they do not matter, but because their books are short compared to the Major Prophets Isaiah, Ezekiel, Jeremiah and Daniel. Many people know their stories – Isaiah prophesies about Jesus through the virgin birth and the suffering servant. Jeremiah 29:11 is an oft quoted verse of hope – The Lord says, “For I know the plans I have for you...” Ezekiel has his famous valley of the dry bones. My children’s favorite stories are Daniel and the lion’s den and the three men in the fiery furnace. Those are good stories, major stories. But when we start considering “the Twelve,”<sup>1</sup> we probably only remember the story of Jonah and the great fish. So my hope is these sermons will convince you why the Minor Prophets’ messages matter. God allowed them to be placed in our Bibles for a reason.

Today we consider the prophet Amos. God says in Amos 7:8, “Look, I am setting a plumb line among my people Israel.” There is some discussion among

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<sup>1</sup> This is how many scholars label the last twelve books in the OT, including Coggins, *Joel and Amos*, NCBC, 2000.

scholars of what this verse means, but I believe it is here that God spelled out Amos’ purpose: Amos was to be Israel’s plumb line.

In terms of construction, a plumb line might not sound as important as a hammer or chainsaw or power drill. A plumb line is a simple device – literally, a string with a weight attached at one end – which is held up to measure the straightness of a wall. When a structure is built “out of plumb”, it not only looks bad; it is in danger of collapsing.

In the days of Amos, Israel was about to collapse. God needed someone to tell them. And God chose Amos. A little context is helpful. Amos was preaching on Israel’s sins during a time of the greatest prosperity in their history. Jeroboam (the 2nd) was Israel’s most successful king. He ruled for forty years. During that time, their enemies left Israel alone.<sup>2</sup> And what was Israel’s response? They turned from God and indulged in decadence, idol worship, and oppression of the weak. Amos accused them of complacency (6:1). The people refused justice and righteousness (5:7). They oppressed the poor and innocent (5:11-12). Over and over, God said, “Return to me!” (4:10-11). God told them, “Seek me and live!” (5:4), but Israel refused.

It is from Amos 5:24 that Martin Luther King Jr. quoted, “Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream!” (ESV)<sup>3</sup> But the reason Dr. King, and Amos, said those words was because the opposite was happening in their worlds. Justice did not roll down. Amos, the prophetic inspector, was called by God to point that out. Amos gave God’s spiritual building

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<sup>2</sup> Billy K. Smith, *Amos and Obadiah*, (NAC, Vol. 19B. Nashville, Tenn.: Broadman & Holman, 1995), 25-26.

<sup>3</sup> Julia Myers O’Brien. “Amos.” (*HBC*, 2000), 648.

report, “Israel – you’ve messed up. I have tried to discipline you, but you no longer listen. So your punishment is coming. You are a leaning tower. You are about to collapse.”

Like Amos, we all know that there is injustice in our world today. But no one likes to be the bearer of bad news. No one likes to hear the words, “Your life is out of line with God. Your building is out of plumb – it needs to be torn down.”

My heart goes out to doctors, chaplains, and others whose jobs include having to deliver bad news. A few years ago, a police officer showed up on the doorstep of a good friend. He was there to inform her that her son was under arrest for armed robbery, and he impounded her vehicle. As her spiritual companions, we did not want her to have to tell us the turmoil her family was going through. No one wants to hear bad news.

This is true in the church. No pastor wants to tell a congregation, “You are not bearing fruit for God. You need to change.” Oh, we like to complain, but no one wants to be the actual person who says to someone else, “That was a bad decision.” “You screwed up.” “You crossed the line.” It doesn’t matter how gracious we are with our words: bad news is bad news. No one likes to deliver it personally. We’d rather pretend everything is all right, when it is not.

But we all need someone to be that prophet, myself included. We all need discipline, correction. We all need the prophetic voices of our teachers, our parents, our professors, our friends, and yes, our pastors. We need the “iron that sharpens iron.” (Proverbs 27:17) And most importantly, when we receive those messages of criticism, no matter if they are couched in positive or negative terms, we need to listen.

Amos was God’s voice to Israel. God called Amos from humble beginnings, from shepherding and fruit-farming. God had bad news for Israel, and Amos’ job was to announce that bad news. Israel did not take it well. The king was mad. The priest was mad. No one likes to be told that their building is leaning. No one likes to be criticized. But God’s patience had worn out. And God set a plumb line in Israel to say, “Time is up.” Amos was that plumb line. And Amos got chewed out for it. The priest said, “Go home! You’re not welcome here.”

Sometimes, bad news in the Bible is actually good news for us. We need a God who loves us enough to discipline us. Many times the prophets’ words are hard, but they show the way that God loves Israel, like any parent who has ever practiced tough love; like any engineer who has ever denied a building permit because the plan was flawed and needed correction.

Amos had the courage to tell Israel about God’s tough love. Amos did not back down. The Bible tells us the rest of the story (II Kings 14 & 17.) King Jeroboam was killed, and Israel was exiled to Assyria in 722 BC. And generations afterward understood that this was God’s righteous judgment. God is jealous, and God is just. God did not let sin go unpunished.

But there is another part of the story. Eventually, God restored Israel. And God sent a new plumb line, someone who always walked the straight and narrow, who always worshipped God with all of his heart, soul, mind, and strength. Like any great prophet, Jesus always spoke the truth. He loved his neighbor as himself. He loved his enemies. He prayed for those who persecuted him. He preached good news to the poor. (Matt 11:5) He was despised and rejected. He

knew suffering. (Isaiah 53:3) And despite his perfect obedience to God, he received the ultimate death penalty – a painful, humiliating death on a cross.

But death could not hold him down. If there were a tombstone over Jesus’ grave, it would have leaned over and fallen. Jesus came forth from the grave alive, upright, and righteous, and threw us a rope – the plumb line was now a lifeline, a way back to a right relationship with God. Jesus defeated sin: our sin, Israel’s sin, and the sin of the whole world.

Our world is out of plumb, spiritually. And we have a message. The bad news has become good news. Do you know the good news of Jesus Christ? God created you. God loves you. But we are sinful and broken. Our spiritual “building” was condemned. But God has given us grace and forgiveness through Jesus Christ, and we can accept that free gift of salvation and rebuild our lives for eternity with him. 1<sup>st</sup> Peter 2:5 tells us that we can be living stones in the house of faith, the Christian Church, whom God has placed on this earth to continue proclaiming the good news of salvation.

So let us go out and be prophetic voices. Let us turn bad news into good news. Let us tell the truth of Jesus Christ, the author and perfecter of our faith. (Hebrews 12:2) He is our plumb line. He is our lifeline. When our world is gone askew, he is our sure and certain hope of salvation. To God, the Great Three in One, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, be all glory and honor forever. Amen.

**Memory Verse: Amos 9:11**

“In that day, I will restore David’s fallen shelter. I will repair its broken walls and restore its ruins and will rebuild it as it used to be.”

### Reflection Questions:

- 1.) Have you ever felt that your life was "out of line"? What parts, specifically?
- 2.) By whose standards do you judge your life? Your own? Someone else's?  
God's?
- 3.) When can bad news be good news? How can something painful, like discipline, cause something better to happen?
- 4.) How did God use Amos to correct Israel? What does that tell us about God?
- 5.) Is Jesus your lifeline?

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