

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost, July 11, 2021  
“Making the Cut” (Amos 7:7-15)

Anyone who knows even a little about construction knows that a plumb line is what carpenters and masons use to check for verticality and alignment. They use a plumb line to make sure what they are working with is straight – whether it be a 2x4 stud or a brick wall.

When Susan and I built our first house in Claremont, it was a family affair. We hired a retired carpenter to guide us, but my day, my uncles, my cousins, and I provided much of the labor. As a result, I was at the construction site on a daily basis for several months. And during that time, I saw a lot of plumb lines and levels put to use. I was convinced that our house was perfectly plumb; that everything was parallel or perpendicular to everything else. I mean, how could it not be?

But when I started hanging wall paper (which was the big thing in the early 80s) I found out how wrong I was. In one corner of the room, I began with a plumb line to insure that the lines in the pattern would be straight. But as I moved around the room – particularly after wallpapering the corners – I noticed that the lines began to shift a bit. They didn’t remain perfectly vertical as I thought they should. To my surprise, something was out of whack and it was throwing my wallpaper off. An old carpenter might say, *It was pert near, but not plumb*. So I had to learn how to make it appear plumb – which was not an easy task for a novice wallpaper hanger. But it eventually turned out OK. In any case, we know it is important that a house be plumb or it could present problems. But we also know that no house is perfectly plumb.

The image of the plumb line can also be applied to other things. Let’s take Duke basketball for example – even though I am not a Duke fan. It was announced recently that Coach K will be retiring after next season. He has been the head coach for more than four decades and holds the record of most wins in college basketball, which even I admit is impressive. His successor will have big shoes to fill.

Ultimately, Coach K is the plumb line against which candidates for his job were measured. There are a lot of good coaches out there who would love to come to Durham, but one name rose to the top of the list: one who has ties to the school, who is part of the Duke family, and one who has shared the philosophy of the coaching staff down through the years. And ultimately, the one making the cut is one who played under Coach K and has been part of his coaching staff. I’m sure Duke fans are excited – and perhaps a bit anxious – to see if Jon Scheyer can measure up and carry on that long-established Duke tradition. He certainly has the pedigree Duke fans are looking for.

At the time of Amos, the people of Israel were like our house in Claremont and like coaches without Duke roots: *pert near, but not plumb*. Like their counterparts in the southern tribe of Judah, they were still God’s people, but they no longer measured up. Living beneath a pious veneer of religion, they had turned away from God to worship idols. As a result, they had experienced a moral and social decline. They had grown hard and callous in their dealings with others, not caring for the poor or helping their neighbor. They made use of temple prostitutes and gagged the prophets God sent to warn them. They were truly a nation in decay!

On to this scene came Amos. Now Amos was no one really special. He was a simple herdsman in a small town in the southern tribe of Judah. But God called him to be a prophet to speak an amazing (but definitely disturbing) word to a people who no longer measured up against the straight line of God's standards. Israel had become a crooked nation and God had a message for them – one he would send through Amos.

I can't imagine what it must have been like for Amos, or for any prophet. I know how nervous I was when I first began preaching and I had had four years of seminary to prepare me. But here was Amos, taken out straight of the pasture and placed in the line of fire. That's what often happened to God's spokesmen. Because they delivered a message of gloom – a message the people did not want to hear – they were met with hostility and violence. Being a prophet was certainly not your dream job.

But this simple herdsman had this vision in which the Lord used a plumb line against a wall, symbolically pointing out that Israel was out of whack and headed for destruction – just like a wall that is not straight will eventually collapse and lay in ruins. This vision was God's call to Amos. Amos answered that call and went to Israel to warn the people that the way they were living could carry some real consequences. *The high places shall be made desolate*, Amos declared. *The sanctuaries of Israel shall be laid waste. I will rise against the house of Jeroboam (the king) with the sword. Israel must go into exile away from the land.*

Now, did God *want* Israel to go into exile? Certainly not! This nation, after all, was his chosen people. God shared a long history with them. But they had long ago abandoned God's word and their wickedness was destroying them *and* their relationship with God. God had to intervene and put an end to her self-destruction.

God is a loving God who desires nothing more than to love us and have us love him in return. But sin gets in the way and makes us crooked. It coaxes us to deviate from the straight path God has set before us. So, not surprisingly, God wants the sin removed so that the relationship he desires with us can be restored. God's Word is the plumb line that helps us to be aware of our sin. But, like I said, most often we fail to measure up. Like Israel, we choose for ourselves a destructive path.

Perhaps we get involved with the wrong crowd, abuse drugs or alcohol, or adopt a behavior or way of life that takes over to the point where we've lost control of who and what we are. Perhaps something in our life has made us bitter and we've become mean, hard-nosed, and cynical, continually seeking revenge and never offering forgiveness. Or maybe we're greedy, using whatever means to accumulate more and more, but never being happy with what we have. We selfishly say, *I'll take care of myself. Let everybody else take care of themselves. I'm not sharing what I've worked to obtain.* Or maybe we're involved in something we know is wrong, but justify it by saying, *I only have one life, and I'm going to live it up. Surely God would want me to be happy.* Yet as hard as we try, true happiness never seems to come.

All these, and more, are the destructive pathways we walk. They destroy us, our relationship with others, and our relationship with God. And this grieves God, just as it did in Amos' day. God made us to live in joy, but we have chosen to live in despair.

I think we can all appreciate the pain God feels. As parents we're grieved when our children begin walking paths we know are potentially destructive. Just so, God cannot bear to see us destroy ourselves. So God intervenes to set us on a right path. Sometimes God banishes us from the garden. Sometimes God floods us out. Sometimes God makes a huge fish swallow us and burp us back out. Sometimes God leads us into slavery and then delivers us. But the greatest intervention of all is when God, in human flesh, died on the cross, bearing your sins and mine and then rose victoriously from the grave.

Our God is mysterious, surprising, perplexing, and downright amazing. Yes, God is working to destroy the evil in our lives by sometimes allowing us to bear the consequences of our sin. But God does this only because he wants us to be free of the destruction we bring upon ourselves. He wants us to be free to live as God's children, filled with joy and love for God and one another. At times, it may feel like punishment, but it is really tough love dispensed by a loving and compassionate God.

My friends, none of us is plumb when measured against God's Word. None of us could ever make the cut on our own. But the Master Carpenter is working each and every day to bring us back into alignment with his will where there is joy and hope now and throughout eternity. Amen.