

“Telling It Straight”

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⁷This is what he showed me: the Lord was standing beside a wall built with a plumb line, with a plumb line in his hand. ⁸And the LORD said to me, “Amos, what do you see?” And I said, “A plumb line.” Then the Lord said, “See, I am setting a plumb line in the midst of my people Israel; I will never again pass them by; ⁹the high places of Isaac shall be made desolate, and the sanctuaries of Israel shall be laid waste, and I will rise against the house of Jeroboam with the sword.”

¹⁰Then Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, sent to King Jeroboam of Israel, saying, “Amos has conspired against you in the very center of the house of Israel; the land is not able to bear all his words. ¹¹For thus Amos has said, ‘Jeroboam shall die by the sword, and Israel must go into exile away from his land.’” ¹²And Amaziah said to Amos, “O seer, go, flee away to the land of Judah, earn your bread there, and prophesy there; ¹³but never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king’s sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom.”

¹⁴Then Amos answered Amaziah, “I am no prophet, nor a prophet’s son; but I am a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees, ¹⁵and the LORD took me from following the flock, and the LORD said to me, ‘Go, prophesy to my people Israel.’

¹⁶“Now therefore hear the word of the LORD. You say, ‘Do not prophesy against Israel, and do not preach against the house of Isaac.’ ¹⁷Therefore thus says the LORD: ‘Your wife shall become a prostitute in the city, and your sons and your daughters shall fall by the sword, and your land shall be parceled out by line; you yourself shall die in an unclean land, and Israel shall surely go into exile away from its land.’” (Amos 7:7-17)

To say that someone is “straight as an arrow” is usually meant as a compliment. Straight arrows, launched correctly, fly straight to a target, so the compliment suggests that a person is honest and genuine... that what you see is what you get... that they can be counted on to do the right thing. This was the kind of person God needed when he called an itinerant farmer to be one of the most unlikely prophets in Israel’s history. In this moment, God needed someone who was as straight as an arrow, a straight shooter who would aim carefully, keep a steady hand, and let the truth fly. That was Amos.

God needed this kind of prophet because God had some hard news that needed to be delivered. As it often did with prophets, the news from heaven took the form of a metaphor. “Amos,” God said, “what do you see?” And what Amos saw was a vision of a plumb line – a string with a weight on the end. Because the plumb line has no choice but to comply with the laws of gravity, when it hangs undisturbed it shows a perfectly vertical line. A plumb line comes in handy when you are building a house, because it is an easy and reliable way to make sure the foundations and walls are straight and true. If something is skewed, uneven, or out of sync, the plumb line reveals those problems so they can be fixed before it is too late.

God gave this vision to Amos because things in Israel were getting out of kilter. The walls of the nation God was building were getting crooked. The foundations were skewed and leaning. God’s blueprints for the people were very specific. It was all laid out in scripture -- how we are to treat one another, how we are to love one another, how we are to look out for the weak and vulnerable among us, how we are to live holy and righteous lives as best we can. Scripture was the plumb line, but no one was looking at it. The human builders were not following the plans. So God the Creator and Master Architect needed to send a messenger to the builders who could help them see how things were not measuring up to God’s standards... and who could also warn them that, if they did



not mend their ways and fix what was broken, the whole house might just come crashing down around them.

This news would obviously be hard to hear and hard to deliver, and that was why God needed Amos. As I said before, calling someone a “straight arrow” is usually a compliment... but a straight arrow can also be, let’s just say, inconvenient. Most people do not like to have their work critiqued. Most people do not like to have their faults pointed out to them. And, for these reasons, most people do not like being bearers of bad news. Amos was called to fill this difficult role – the role of the straight shooter who would aim carefully, keep a steady hand, and let the truth fly.

And when he did that, those in power reacted very predictably. When Amos told everyone that the king of Israel was going in bad directions, that his methods were not righteous and his policies were no longer aligned with the order that God had intended and created, the king’s in-house prophet Amaziah went running to tell the king. And then he returned to Amos with a dire warning, which was really a threat... one that was no doubt mandated by the king himself. “Get out of here,” he said. “You are not welcome here, and your message is not wanted here.” And the basis for Amaziah’s threat spoke volumes. “Get out of here, Amos,” the court prophet said, “for this is the king’s sanctuary... this is a temple of the kingdom.”

I have to wonder if that was a Freudian slip.¹ I have to think that Amaziah intended to dress up his warning to Amos in more diplomatic language. After all, the temple in Bethel was purportedly a temple of God, and Amaziah still claimed to be a prophet of God just like Amos. It was just that Amaziah’s career path had gone differently. Where Amos was a humble farmer called out of the fields for a special assignment, Amaziah had worked his way up the prophetic corporate ladder, right up into the house of the king. He was the royal prophet-in-charge, the king’s right-hand religious man. And let’s face it, on most days the word of the king seemed a whole lot closer than the Word of God, and the power of the king seemed a whole lot more present than the power of God. A man in Amaziah’s position should have sent Amos away with language that was a bit more cloaked and savvy, but in the heat of the moment his subconscious mind grabbed the wheel and the real truth slipped out. You see, Amos you have not really come to a house of God. You have come to a sanctuary run by and for the king... a Temple of the Kingdom.

And make no mistake, in the Temple of the Kingdom, there is no plumb line. There is no innate truth, there are no governing values or principles, and there is no service to the greater good. No, in the Temple of the Kingdom, truth is whatever serves the king and the good is whatever the king wants it to be.

And what does Amos do, in response to this threat? He aims carefully and keeps a steady hand. “I’m just a farmer,” he says. “I don’t know why the Lord called me to bring this word, but he did. Now, therefore, hear the word of the Lord.” And then he let the truth fly.

That same plumb line that Amos saw, the same vision he shared with Israel, is still here. It has always been here, and it always will be here. And the decision for us is the same as the decision for Israel thousands of years ago. You and I have to decide whether we are going to trust that plumb line or not, whether we are going to respect that plumb line or not. We have to decide if the story of God’s people, if the revelation of God’s power and presence, if the witness of God’s Word is going to be the standard we follow, or if we are going to trust something else or somebody else to tell us what is right and what is good.

Here is the main point. This is a time for straight shooters. This is a moment for people who are willing to tell it straight. There are things that are happening in our world that are clearly skewed,

¹ Miranda Hassett, <https://stdunstans.com/2016/07/sermon-july-17/>

clearly crooked. The house we are building as a society is neither straight nor true, and we know this because the plumb line, which is always aligned with God's order, does not lie.

So, in closing, I have three brief things to say to any of us who are looking to be more aligned with God's view of the world. And I will try to shoot these arrows as straight as I can.

The first is obvious, or at least it should be obvious, and it is that our ultimate allegiance is to God. The earliest Christians knew very well that, when they proclaimed that Jesus Christ was Lord, they were also proclaiming that Caesar was not. Ancient Judaism knew it as well. It's right there in Deuteronomy 6: "*Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God... is one. Love the Lord your God with ALL your heart and with ALL your soul and with ALL your strength. Write this on your heart. Teach this to your children. Talk about this when you are at home or away, when you lie down and when you get up.*"² Our ultimate allegiance is to God, and that is our only temple.

The second thing is that truth – capital T Truth -- is real. There are values and principles we are called to believe and to follow. There is God-given guidance about what is good and what is bad. There are boundaries to faithful behavior. There is a moral center to the universe, and that center is found only in God our Creator... and in God's Word to us.

And the third thing is that this Truth we are given is neither complicated nor hard to understand. Any child can see it. It reminds me of that old story about President Calvin Coolidge, who went to church by himself one Sunday morning. When he got home his wife asked him what the sermon had been about. Coolidge, who was known to be a man of few words, said simply, "It was about sin."

"Well," Mrs. Coolidge asked, "what did he say about sin?"

And the President replied, "He was against it."³

Knowing the basics of what is right is not complicated. The plumb line has always been there. As the prophet Micah said, "God has shown you, O mortal, what is good. God has told you what is required, and that is *"to act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God."*⁴ The prophets have always pointed us to God's plumb line. It has never been hidden. We have just quit paying attention to it.

Our choice is simple. We can work to align ourselves and align our world with the righteous, loving, and gracious values of God's plumb line, or we can take the path of least resistance and accept the broken blue prints of the world. The truth is that God loves straight

shooters, and our world needs straight shooters. So, let's aim carefully, keep a steady hand, and let the truth fly. **Amen.**

² Deuteronomy 6:4-9.

³ John A. Redhead, *Sermons on Bible Characters* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1963), 59.

⁴ Micah 6:8.