**July 14, 2019**

**Amos 7:1-9**

Today our reading will move from the prophet Elisha to the prophet Amos – a man who was blessed to live in a relatively peaceful and prosperous time. While some of Israel’s prophets (like Elijah and Elisha) had the challenge of speaking to a community suffering any number of tragic and traumatic circumstances, Amos’ challenge was quite different. He was called to speak to the people when life was good “and the livin’ was easy.” Amos tried to make the people remember that they were called to faithful discipleship *everyday* of their lives, not just in the midst of trouble. And unfortunately, the people never did a good job following God. In good times and in bad, Israel turned to other gods, were not good neighbors, and focused on personal success instead of caring for the poor and needy. This is the same old story as heard by dozens of leaders and prophets before, but now told by Amos at a time when it was hard to make excuses; there was no Pharaoh enslaving or bringing suffering, and no war dividing the people.

In these particular verses, Amos relayed God’s frustration with the people’s misbehavior and God’s desire to punish them accordingly. But Amos didn’t just relay the message; he called for mercy from God. Amos spoke up for the people.

His prophecy concluded with a vision of a plumb line, which some of you may have used in building or surveying or wallpapering or other tasks that require a straight line. Plumb lines are tools which have perfected the construction of the world’s oldest and most cherished buildings – from ancient Egypt’s palaces and temples to Europe’s tallest cathedrals like Notre Dame and Westminster Abbey. If a wall was plumb, it would stand straight from the foundation to the top. If a wall was out of plumb, however, it would resemble the leaning Tower of Pisa. In these verses, God held a plumb line to show just how far off the mark the people have gone.

It is also worth noting that Amos referred to the Jewish people as “Jacob” in this passage, not “Israel.” Don’t be confused. He was still talking about the same chosen people of God.

Now, listen again for the word of God to the people of God.

**READ Amos 7.**

In the beginning, as recorded by the authors of Genesis, God made people in the image of God – the *imago dei*. One author told of God creating the man (A-dam… Adam) “from the dust of the ground… and the breath of God.” [[1]](#footnote-1) From this *imago dei* and the breath of God, we know that we are made *from* God’s holiness, and made to be part of God’s holiness. Much later, in the book of Psalms, we are reminded that God “formed our inward parts [and] knit us together in our mothers’ wombs.” [[2]](#footnote-2) Over and over again in the Bible, the people of God are taught that God is our creator and builder, working with both simple and mysterious substances, making both our largest and most intricate parts to be *in plumb* with God’s greater design.

God did not just make us and abandon us like empty buildings in a ghost town. God continued to *inhabit* us with the Holy Spirit. We remember the story of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit blazed through the house and appeared among the disciples and on the disciples and within the disciples. We remember how Jesus called them to carry his Spirit into the world, building and pro-creating a new family of faith through the waters of baptism and everyday discipleship. We remember how Jesus called them to share bread and wine with new believers, eating and drinking the new covenant together in a Communion feast. So we know that Jesus and the Holy Spirit even now keep and continue to call The Church into plumb with these sacred and sacramental gifts.

Last fall Sweet Hollow took on the practice of memorizing Bible verses. One of those we learned together was Micah 6:8 What does the Lord require of you? **To do justice, to love kindness, to walk humbly with God.** This is part of God’s plumb line, meant to help us align our lives with God’s design.

Or consider the greatest commandment as Jesus told a young lawyer: Love the Lord with all your soul, and mind. The second is Love your neighbor as yourself. [[3]](#footnote-3) This, too, is part of God’s plumb line, meant to keep us on the straight and narrow righteous path.

God has given us a plumb line rich with stories and experiences. We have countless ways to know God’s design for our lives, and countless ways to line ourselves up. Yet we know “faithful” followers of God have failed at living a life *in plumb* since the beginning. A-dam and Eve, the very first creations, quickly fell out of plumb when they didn’t listen to God’s command, but did their own thing. Moses and the Israelites, after being given Ten Commandments, didn’t obey these simple guiding principles. They resisted living a life *in plumb* with God’s teachings. And the story continued through Amos’s time up to our own. So as much as The Church’s story – and our story – begins with God building us in plumb with God’s desires, our story is equally one of leaning and growing away from God’s righteous paths.

This prophecy which Amos brought was uncomfortable for Israel then, and is uncomfortable for us now. We don’t like the thinking about the ways we offend God, the sins we commit. Most people don’t even like the Prayer of Confession in worship; it’s uncomfortable for us to think that we are living in such a way that might be wrong or offensive to God. And we don’t like it to be held accountable. “We do not want a plumb line that reveals how far off the mark we've fallen… because when we do, we must reckon with whether we will feign ignorance or follow God's direction.” [[4]](#footnote-4)

So all of these ancient biblical words which have been said and sung by Jewish and Christian disciples for millennia. All of these words like Micah 6:8 and the Gospels’ Greatest Commandment and the stories before, between, and beyond them – we know these treasured words. We believe these holy words, yet we still have trouble putting them into practice. Over these millennia, how many times have Christian and Jewish disciples *not* done justice, loved kindness, or walked humbly with God? How many times have Christian and Jewish disciples *not* loved God with our whole heart and mind and soul? How many times have we *not* loved our neighbors? Every day. In large and small ways – wars and persecution and systemic abuses (like racism and sexism and other forms of bigotry), in the stores we patronize, the purchases we make, the carbon footprint we leave – we fall out of plumb with just those few verses alone, let alone the rest of God’s plumb line. Looking at God’s measuring stick, then looking at our own lives, is like looking at the infected wound underneath the bandage. It’s not something we want to see, but it is something that must be dealt with. Will we feign ignorance or follow God’s direction? We must admit who God designed us to be, and how are we living up to that standard (or not).

Presbyterians require all congregations to report on their history and future after significant changes or critical periods. The report itself is called a “plumb line” because we reflect on God’s building line for our life together, and how we are following God’s intentions (or not). Sweet Hollow completed our report in 2017, then began work on another report specifically addressing our pastoral leadership. But as we tried to envision who God was calling us to be, we had to stop – just last summer! – because our questions outnumbered our answers. One year ago we did not know *if* we could afford a full time pastor. One year ago we didn’t know *if* we could afford to maintain our church property. Not having the answers or clarity in conversation about these and other significant questions, we signed up to participate in Project Regeneration, a program led by national Presbyterian staff to help congregations like ours ask and answer big, hard questions. These staff have reminded us that we may have *a* church, we may be part of *The Church*, but by ourselves, we are one more man-made institution with limited resources of people, energy, time, and money. And all man-made institutions have a birth, life, and death. The prophet Isaiah reminded Israel “The grass withers, the flowers fall; [only] the word of God remains forever.” [[5]](#footnote-5) Only God is eternal – not people or flowers or churches, not businesses or schools or all the things we know and love. God alone is eternal. And God knows that, so God designed us with a different purpose from God’s own.

God never asked disciples to sustain themselves or maintain congregations. God asked disciples to give all that we have and all that we are back to God. God asked disciples to steward creation. God wants our people, our energy, our time and money to do justice, love kindness, walk humbly with God, and love our neighbors.

The question for Sweet Hollow is then: how can we live a life *in plumb* with God’s design, not focused on sustaining ourselves, but actually being The Church in the world today? How *can* we give all that we have and all that we are to God?

The final paragraph of our “Plumb Line” report, as written by our own church members, concluded that “It is our hope, with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to revitalize our church family where there is more interaction among members beyond the Sunday morning service, as we reach out and engage our church community and our local community through Christian fellowship. This call begins with our Church Officers (Elders), our Pastor, our Deacons and our church members: to spread the message of Jesus Christ, working together while helping to enrich the lives of others.”

That was written in 2017. How are we doing? We’ve had a great year together, but we have completely ignored these big questions. You know what they say about good intentions… Our best intentions are not good enough. We have real work to do. The work of reflection (in holding ourselves accountable to God’s plumb line), the work of discernment (in seeing where God is calling us to be and go), and the work of discipleship (rolling up our sleeves, getting our hands dirty and our boots wet) is before us.

What can we do? We can pray about this. Ask God who God would have us be, and how we can align ourselves to those marks? We can talk with our church officers and one another. We can participate in the congregational forum scheduled for August 4, when we will talk about Project Regeneration and our current church staffing. We can join committees this fall and reach out to friends and neighbors asking them to share in Sweet Hollow’s mission and ministry.

Let us humbly and faithfully lift up our church before God, hoping and praying for our life to come. Amen.

1. Genesis 2:7 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Psalm 139:13 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Matthew 22:35-40 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Duffield, Jill. *Presbyterian Outlook* lectionary commentary Fifth Sunday after Pentecost. July 14, 2019, [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Isaiah 40:8 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)