

Better Get It Straight

Amos 7:7-17
Colossians 1:9-14

Stonehenge makes me ask, “How in the *world* did they do that?!?” Constructing it required fabricating, transporting and elevating massive stone components to install them in place dozens of feet above-ground with such security many remain intact to this day. The earliest part of Stonehenge was built approximately 5,000 years ago by a shadowy conference of three ancient tribes. The most powerful towing animal they had at their disposal was the dog. *How did they do that?!?”* The answer is human ingenuity. They devised levers and winches, invented stronger ropes, solved the problems as they presented themselves. Among the tools they used was the plumb line, known to the Prophet Amos in obscure Palestine some 750 years before Christ.

A plumb line consists of a weight at the end of a string. Its purpose is to measure the perfectly vertical. When used with a square this reveals the elevated horizontal. Linda and I spent a summer at Ghost Ranch, the Presbyterian conference center in New Mexico. I worked the actual ranch, cultivating the alfalfa fields and keeping the irrigation system clear as it flowed down from a spring in a box canyon above. I also served as grunt labor on the construction of four adobe homes. They combined up-to-the-minute technology with sustainable building techniques. In a climate that regularly sees plus-one hundred highs throughout the summer, they

needed no air conditioning. At an altitude that regularly sees lows in the teens throughout the winter, they needed only solar-powered furnaces. They were and are brilliant and I wish more construction used their techniques.

The Navajo and Latino builders also used low-tech construction practices. They started with a plumb line and a square. The plans called for a floor that sloped one inch per ten feet, from the back of each house to its front. So they nailed together a ten foot 2x4 and a one inch stub. Then they used a plumb line and a square to establish level. Then they attached a string ten feet long to stakes with each end perfectly level. Then they laid the 2x4 down along the string. With the “uphill” part of the board even with the string, they could use spades to remove the desert sand to precisely the correct angle to achieve that one inch per ten feet decline. Then the house could use pipes installed beneath the cement floors to circulate the water which, in a closed system, was used to cool it in the hot weather. Ingenious. Replicable. It takes longer to write it than it does to do it.

The Prophet Amos is saying, “Look, I’m a simple man. I didn’t ask for this job. The Lord has called me to speak his truth to power. You can try as hard as you please to claim otherwise, but I know up from down. And I’m speaking to you on the level.” Amos is the earliest of the prophets with books bearing their names in the Old Testament. He lived during the realm of Jeroboam II, who was having a good run—from a human perspective. Jeroboam had expanded northern Israel’s territory with a series of victories over neighboring kingdoms. He had funded the construction of

places of worship “on the high places”, in the passes of a mountain ridge that ran through his territory.

But Jeroboam had also made deals with the devils. He had entered into alliances with the rich and powerful that funded his ambitions. Think Julius Caesar, Bismark, Saddam Hussein and certain contemporaries of ours. Under Jeroboam the poor and the dispossessed were trampled. Amos calls himself a “dresser of sycamores”, not a prophet. Sycamore dressers pruned the trees each autumn to make firewood for the common people. They were **of** the common people. Amos knows he has no power except the power conferred upon him when the Lord called him to the prophetic ministry. It turns out that is terrific power. Amos hears the call of the Lord to measure true vertical with a plumb line. Anything not vertical will stand in contrast, like the villains' lairs in the campy Batman TV series of the 60's. Shot slightly askew, they conveyed the sense that bad guys operated out of those locations. Jeroboam's high altars will get the same treatment in God's eyes.

Amaziah, Jeroboam's hand-picked high priest, warns Amos to go away and shut up. How dare you criticize the king? To which Amos doubles down: “Therefore 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.’” In other words, the Lord actually means what the Lord says. You had better get it straight. If you fail to establish your kingdom on proper verticals and

straight angles you will pay a comprehensive price.

We say of one of our dogs, "She's as good as she has to be." We say of the other, "She *wants* to be good." I suppose what we're really saying is, neither of them really is a "good dog". Yet we love them both. Perhaps this is how God feels about us. With a patience that lasted centuries God waited for the children of Israel to get it straight. They never did. God sent Amos and his peers, prophets thundering the word of the Lord across the centuries. They did not listen. Can we? The Apostle Paul wrote to the Colossians in a good mood. He had gotten a glowing report from an emissary, Epaphras, that they had accepted the Good News of the Gospel for themselves and spread it throughout their region. "For this reason," Paul wrote, "since the day we heard it, we have not ceased praying for you and asking that you be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding..."

Have you ever known someone who really means it when they say, "I've been praying for you"? As I type these words I have specific people in mind. One of the oldest members of this congregation lives in assisted living, has never heard me preach in person and does not listen to our digital services. Yet every time I call or visit with her, she asks specific and on-point questions about my family. Then she tells me she's been praying for us all. How can I not believe her?!? When Paul writes he has not ceased praying for the Colossians I give him equal credibility. And for what did he pray? That they might "walk worthy of the Lord".

What does it mean to “walk worthy of the Lord?” It means to love mercy, to seek justice and to walk humbly with our God. To love mercy. To give grace. To support and not judge people facing life-changing, impossible decisions. I will never understand how it feels to experience an unwelcome pregnancy. I cannot become pregnant. Loving mercy in this case requires that I recognize the fear and the isolation so many pregnant women feel. One very close friend of ours, describing the instant she learned she and her boyfriend had conceived, calls it the “Oh my god!” moment. Will he marry me and father this baby? Do I want him to? Do I want this baby? How will I pay for the delivery and where will we live and who will help me and should I stay in school and put it up for adoption and what will my parents say?

For the record, they decided to get married. They had that child plus two more. They now have five grandchildren. But not every pregnant woman has the same options. The same potential income. The same support from churches, friends and family. As followers of Jesus we must show mercy to pregnant women facing their own Oh my God! moments. Further, we are to seek justice. Our state, like all forty-nine others, now faces a political question. Once again, I will not use this pulpit to advocate for one position on such a fraught and divisive issue. That would be a breach of my God-given responsibility to lead this church, which contains people who passionately disagree on abortion. And once again, I will gladly speak—and listen—with all who wish to discuss it with me privately. Having stated that last Sunday, I can tell you that more than a few took me up on that offer. And the sky did not fall.

As we face this political decision, as followers of Jesus we have the opportunity to, as the great 20th century theologian Reinhold Niebuhr put it, “interrogate our faith”. We have the chance to ask what we believe God calls us to do about justice issues. In 1915 Niebuhr graduated from seminary and took the call to pastor a small church in West Detroit. During his years there he watched the flood of African-Americans coming up from the Deep South to work in the auto plants. He watched them face red-lining from banks who refused them mortgages in “white” neighborhoods. He watched their children get segregated into inferior schools. He watched the systematic repression of their dreams. And he saw how pointless it was to write letters to the editor or to get the ministerial alliance to issue statements.

Reinhold Niebuhr decided God had called him to seek justice, not just to talk about seeking justice. He worked with two men in his church, bankers, to advocate for offering loans to qualified borrowers regardless of skin color. He worked with another man in his church, a white principal of a “colored” elementary school, to seek greater funding and equipment for his students. Both efforts resulted in modest success. But they yielded enough success to become models for progressively-minded people in that community to this day. Linda and I know a man who retired as principal of that same school, now Niebuhr Elementary, in 2003.

God wants us to get it straight. God gives us the tools to measure up and down, and to create level playing fields. God's Word tells us what mercy and justice look like, and that God calls us to pursue them. Don't just talk about it, do it.