



LAKWOOD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Rev. Katie Robb

July 11, 2010

In the Midst of My People

Amos 7:7-17

Amos 7:7-17

⁷ This is what he showed me: the Lord was standing beside a wall built with a plumb line, with a plumb line in his hand.

⁸ And 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;

⁹ the 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."

¹⁰ Then 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.

¹¹ For thus Amos has said, 'Jeroboam shall die by the sword, and Israel must go into exile away from his land.'"

¹² And Amaziah said to Amos, "O seer, go, flee away to the land of Judah, earn your bread there, and prophesy there;

¹³ but never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king's sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom."

¹⁴ Then Amos answered Amaziah, "I am no prophet, nor a prophet's son; but I am a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees,

¹⁵ and 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."

¹⁷ 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 1898, a Chicago columnist named Finley Peter Dunne coined a phrase about the role of the newspaper in his society, the age of muckraking journalism. The paper, he said, “comforts th’afflicted and afflicts th’ comfortable.”¹ Throughout the century that followed, a number of astute religious leaders have picked up the phrase to describe what should be the aim of religion in society.

“To comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable.”

Let it be said that sometimes we in this room are the afflicted. Sickness, insecurity, unemployment, emotional pain, addiction, depression, grief and loss are certainly among us, and in those situations let us as a church do our best to comfort. Let us call on God to heal our every ill, to bring peace where there is none.

Yes, at times we in this room are the afflicted.

And we, as a church and as individuals do our best to comfort the afflicted.

But at times we in this room are also the comfortable.

(This is when you start squirming in your seats if you haven’t already...and maybe after hearing our scripture lesson you felt a little uneasy, but my point is that we sit here on brand new pew cushions singing beautiful music on bellies full of nice breakfasts having been able to bathe and dress in clean clothes thinking about whether we will go to the beach or maybe the mall or mow the lawn this afternoon...we might be a little squirmy, but we are comfortable).

To comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable.

It seems to be the job of a prophet, afflicting the comfortable. The vision of the prophet Amos involves locusts and death by the sword and bankruptcy and exile. Talk about affliction!

It is scary to hear from prophets because prophets do not just provide the vision of punishment that is to come. They make us look at our own failings in the eyes of God. In many ways, prophets reveal the heart of God.

Locating Amos

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Finley_Peter_Dunne

Our scripture lesson today comes from a guy whose whole job was to afflict the comfortable of Israel. Amos is one of the “minor prophets” of the Old Testament and, as you know, prophets spoke throughout much of Israel’s history as mouthpieces for God. Amos heard God’s voice and spoke in Israel during a time of relative peace, calm, and prosperity for the kingdom. And to Amos God’s voice did not sound like a rushing wind or a gentle father or a still small thing, but rather God’s voice sounded to Amos like a ROARING LION.

For, while the people enjoyed the peace that they were in, they thought they were being faithful, too. Attendance at places of worship was good and tithes were rolling in² - Amos was able to see what they didn’t. He saw God’s roaring anger over the things Israel had forgotten. The people they had forgotten.

Amos’ first indictment of Israel says: “They sell the righteous for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, they trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth...”³ You are my people, God says, and you are doing THIS?? This was not my vision for our relationship.

Remember now that Amos is the guy Martin Luther King, Jr. famously quoted about letting “justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an everflowing stream.”⁴ God’s vision was not the mistreatment of the poor in the interest of the wealthy.

But for some reason, only Amos sees the plumb line. “See I am setting a plumb line in the midst of my people.” A plumb line measures the straightness of a wall. And you builders know, if the wall is not upright, it must come down to be rebuilt.

God’s judgment through the prophet is scary. When we see it, some heavy walls might have to come down. And we forget it sometimes, pretty often, actually, in the church. The death and destruction are part of our story. The natural cycle of things.

Kathryn Schulz has just published a wonderful study of human error called *Being Wrong* – I wish every Presbyterian would read it. In it, she says: “You might never have given a thought to what I’m calling wrongology; you might be the farthest thing in the world from a wrongologist; but, like it or not, you are already a wrongitioner. We all are.” She acknowledges the comforting illusions of certainty: the sense that our world is stable, that we are safe, that we are informed, intelligent, and powerful. But despite those attractions, we are all wrongitioners, and she calls on us to “foster an intimacy with our own fallibility.”⁵

And before I continue let me say how HARD it is for me to preach this sermon.

² Limburg, James. *Interpretation: Hosea – Micah*. Pg. 84.

³ Amos 2:6-7

⁴ Amos 5:24

⁵ Kathryn Schulz, *Being Wrong* (New York: Harper Collins 2010), pp. 9-10, 23, 169.

For while I do think we must recognize just exactly how fallible we are, how much we mess up and fall short, I think the church has at times overdone it with the judgment message at the expense of the belovedness message, for we are all God's beloved, too, in the midst of our broken, messed-up humanness.

I think it is important to note here that Amos is speaking judgment to Israel as a society, not to particular individuals.

I remember as a young girl in church feeling uneasy with the Prayer of Confession each week. We'd speak the words together, as we do here, and as I spoke them, I would think to myself "but I didn't do these things."

I didn't understand the concept of social sin, that even if I hadn't done this or that or neglected to love in some way, it didn't mean we as a church, hadn't.

God wants us, together, as an institution, to measure up to a relationship with God. It is much harder to see, usually, social sin, because it is diffuse. While an individual might give new clothes to a clothing bank without realizing those clothes were made on the backs of underpaid sweatshop workers far away.

While a Presbyterian church might welcome a gay man or lesbian woman into membership, our institutional policies, at least for now, still preclude that individual from ordained service. So individual acts of generosity and welcome shield us from our ability to see social sin.

Amos tries to get us to take the blinders off.

The job of the prophet is to uphold God's covenant with Israel. Remember it: "I will be your God and you will be my people." "You shall have no other God's before me."

A friend once described the covenant to me in terms of the cross. It goes in two directions: The vertical line represents our relationship with God. The horizontal line represents our relationships with each other. Our call is to live in both directions, as God so roaringly reminds Israel through Amos.

Amos speaks in the context of the worshipping community at Bethel, but it is appropriate that we think also in terms of our own worshipping community.

Discomforting the comfortable

Amaziah, the priest at Bethel, could not hear Amos' message. "The land cannot bear it," he said as he tried to censor the prophet and get him and his disruption to leave. He ran directly to the king to report a threat.

The religious status quo could not face a word of judgment, listen and absorb it. But what if he had responded differently? What if he had heard this disruptive voice as the voice of God? What if he had heard not as much the consequence of Israel's failings (the gloom and doom), but had heard more the reasoning behind it, seen the plumb line that revealed a covenant broken by neglect and abuse of the outsider?

Can we as a church, as a community, hear a hard word?

Where are we so comfortable that we are blind to those we neglect and abuse?

Can we hear a word from an outsider? A word of critique? Or will we always protect ourselves and the way we do things first? Will we protect our relative peace and comfort over living into God's covenant? Or can we see some walls that must be broken down to straighten us out?

The PC(USA) was hard at work on institutional behaviors and identity last week at its 219th General Assembly. Almost 600 commissioners from around the country gathered to listen for God's voice in our midst, to work on the ways that we, as an institution, might live in right relationship with God and God's people.

They made decisions on who we are as a people, with proposals going out to Presbyteries next year about a new confession, a new form of government, a revision of the ordination standards that would end the exclusion of qualified gay and lesbian people called to ministry.

They wrote statements to guide us and our nation on Middle East Peace and war in Iraq and Afghanistan. (I watched via livestreaming video online, riveted by the Parliamentary Procedure of it all).

It was hard hard work and there will be those who disagree with some of the actions taken. But what I love is that we are part of a church that is willing to look at itself. To ask where God might be ready to reform us, if only we would respond.

Exercise

Now – I could make a list for you of how we, Lakewood, as a people, might need to change, where walls might need to be broken down, but this is the priesthood of all believers, and so, I'm going to ask you to do some of this work.

I want you to take a pencil out of the pew and think for a moment before you write something down on your bulletin cover.

If God were to set a plumb line in our midst...what walls might need to come down here at Lakewood? Where might we be a little crooked and out of right relationship with God? Not for you, personally, but for us, as a community? Can you hear an outsider's voice that would speak a hard work to us?

Who is it and what are they saying? (And if you are visiting today, think about a community that you are a part of.) What has come to mind for you as this sermon has unfolded?

I welcome your thoughts and insights.

If you want to leave what you have written with me today, or expand on it in an e-mail, or discuss it over lunch with me or with each other, please do. I am eager to listen, even if it afflicts me where I am comfortable!

In the Midst of My People...

The hope is that we hear the prophet's word, that we look at ourselves with God's eyes, believing that we can do better for our neighbors.

In the midst of MY people, God says, I will set a plumb line. You are my beloved, God says, and as such I expect of you to love one another, as individuals, yes, but as a whole people, too. God claims us as a covenant people, though we stumble and fall and ignore the covenant.

In the midst of MY people, I will set a plumb line.

God loves us enough to tell us the truth about ourselves. And the truth will set us free to live into God's claim upon us.

Amen and Amen