

Sermon on Amos 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;
 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.”

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.”

Then Amos answered Amaziah, “I am^a no prophet, nor a prophet’s son; but I am^b 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.’

“Now therefore hear the word of the LORD.
 You say, ‘Do not prophesy against Israel,
 and do not preach against the house of Isaac.’
 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.’”

Brothers and Sisters in Christ...

I want to start out with a bit of news that will, I have little doubt, not shock you. And here it is: People in power like to control speech. That is, they don't like free speech and they want to shut it down. It is happening right now all over the world. There is no free speech in Russia, China, Hong Kong, certain parts of the Middle East, certain countries in Central America. In those countries, the government shuts down free speech. And even in countries—like the United States—where we do have free speech, there are many who believe that the tech lords on platforms such as Google, Facebook, and Twitter use their algorithms to shut down dissenting speech. And in many places, the person whose speech the authorities most want to shut down, is God. The authorities don't like the Word of God. And they don't like those who speak God's Word.

Well, all of this is nothing new. In the ancient, in the Bible, you find that God's word was also often not welcomed. And a case in point is the prophet Amos. Amos ran afoul of two authorities who didn't much like his preaching. The first was King Jeroboam, the ruling monarch of the northern kingdom of Israel. And the second was his minister of, well, ministers—the High Priest Amaziah of Bethel. And these guys didn't need any mathematical algorithms to silence Amos. They planned on using the sword—which in their reasoning, was more powerful than the pen.

And here's the thing about the prophet Amos—people didn't like him, or his speech, or the God who spoke through him. My retired colleague Mark Hillmer had a doctoral teacher named Sheldon Brand, who said, “If you like the prophet Amos, you don't understand him.”

And both King Jeroboam and High Priest Amaziah would have totally agreed. First, Amos was a foreigner—he was from the southern kingdom of Judah. And second, Amos was a lay person. Amos was not a trained prophet. He was a farmer. He was not licensed to be a prophet in the kingdom of Israel, where he showed up breathing fire and spitting

God's word. The High Priest Amaziah mistook Amos for a professional prophet—seminary trained, newly ordained, and looking to be paid an entry-level pastoral salary for his preaching.

He said, "Go back home to Judah, you hick, find a pulpit there. Earn your salary there. Find some sheep there to tend. But don't preach here. This is Bethel, King Jeroboam of Israel's National Cathedral. Look at the sign on the wall: Judeans Need Not Apply. Farmers Need Not Apply."

Amos replied, "I'm neither a priest nor a prophet—I don't even own a clergy shirt. I'm a farmer and a vineyard keeper. But God called me away from my flocks and fields and sent me here, because there is a famine of the word of God here. So hear the Word of the Lord. . . ."

And then Amos told of a vision he had received from God.

This is what God showed me: the Lord was standing beside a wall built with a plumb line, with a plumb line in his hand. And the LORD said to me, "Amos, what do you see?" And I said, "A plumb line." Then the Lord said,

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and I will rise against the house of Jeroboam with the sword.”

Now the key word here is plumb line. As a Bible teacher, I recommend that when a term occurs in a passage that you do not know, find a good Bible dictionary and look it up. So, of course, when I came across the term plumb line, I went to my favorite Bible dictionary—Ace the Place of the Helpful Hardware folks. A plumb line is a construction device that helps one build a wall straight and true and trustworthy. The image here is of God as a building inspector. Now I live in Minnesota, and you may recall 15 or so years ago, we had a bridge over the Mississippi suddenly come crashing down. So, we appreciate the work of building inspectors. When walls and buildings are not built straight and true, things can come crashing down.

The Lord, envisioned as a building inspector, had a message for the house of Israel—for its temples, sanctuaries, and houses of worship—and for the house of Jeroboam: “I am about to measure you to determine if you are upright and true. I’m going to set my plumb line in your midst, and if you are not trustworthy and true, I’m going to come at

you like hurricane, and knock down every temple, sanctuary, house of worship, and the royal house itself.” Thus says the Lord. In the rest of the book, we find out exactly what the people’s sins were:

- The wealthy trampled the poor and “sold the needy for a pair of sandals”
- The people engaged in exploitive sexual practices
- They violated God’s commandments with routine dismissiveness
- They prevented true prophets from preaching God’s word
- They took bribes in the courts and cheated victims
- The religious sanctuaries were places where offerings and taxes were collected, but people were not taught God’s word—and the people preferred it that way
- In the marketplace, illegal and unjust weights and measures led to exploitation and fraud

To all of this, Amos cried, “Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream.” Choose this day whom you will serve: God and life, or, or Death and sin.

And they chose sin. They had made their beds of ivory and they chose to lie in them.

And to all of this preaching, the King and the High Priest had an answer. It is quoted in today’s reading: “Never again prophesy at Bethel, it is the King’s sanctuary . . . Do not prophesy against Israel, and do not preach against the house of Isaac.”

No wonder, then, that the authorities moved to silence Amos. According to Amos 1:1, all of Amos’ prophetic words were probably spoke in a single year. Meaning that after just a short time, the authorities silenced him. They may have simply deported him back to his home country of Judah. Or, like the prophets Micaiah and Jeremiah, they may have thrown him in jail. Or perhaps, like John the Baptist, Martin Luther King, and countless preachers through the centuries, they may have murdered him. The authorities will often go to the farthest extreme to silence the word of God.

Now, before we get upset that the authorities wanted to deplatform Amos and cancel him, we should remember the words of the good professor Sheldon Brand. If you think you like Amos, you don't understand him.

If Amos were here today, he would want you to know that you and I are no better than and little different from Amaziah and Jeroboam. Would you like Amos, with his plumb line, to come inside your spiritual house to see if everything is on the straight and narrow? As a spiritual building inspector, would you want him checking every electrical circuit, testing every plumbing fixture, and checking the foundation to see if it is level and sound?

And speaking of foundations and houses, I am reminded of another spiritual house inspector in the Bible. The authorities also tried to silence this other preacher. That other preacher said once said this: "Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock." There is a bit of good news here, for those of

you who—like me—live in a spiritual glass house in which the windows have already had stones thrown through them, in which all of the kettles and pots are already smudged with the hypocritical soot of sin.

And that good news is this—this other preacher not only spoke the word of God, he was the word of God incarnate. As it says in John 1, “In the beginning was the Word. And the Word was with God and the Word was God.”

A friend of mine likes to say, “God has spoken a word of love, grace, and forgiveness to the world. His name is Jesus.” This Word that the second preacher spoke was also unwelcome. It says, “The world did not know him.” But, praise the Lord, the Word of God remains forever. God spoke this Word whose name is Jesus and God raised him to new life for you and for me. And when God gets out the plumb line to test whether our houses are straight and trustworthy and true, God measures not us but Jesus. When God tests the foundations upon which our spiritual houses are built, he finds the strong foundation of his own word. And in fact, the word of love that God has spoken whose name is Jesus actually now dwells in you, purifying and sanctifying you.

As an apostle later wrote: “you are the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.”

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