

Preaching for Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd  
Date: July 11, 2021. Year B 7<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost  
Text: Amos 7:7-15, Mark 6:14-29

Pastor Scott Trevithick

Title: Prophets and Plumb Lines

Focus: The sermon will rely on both the Amos and Mark texts to describe the work of the prophet as truth-teller to the culture & to those in power, with the intent of bringing them back to plumb or to God's intent. Being a prophet is not an easy calling; oftentimes, people in power do not want to hear the truth. As followers of Jesus, what's our responsibility to tell the truth, particularly when it may come at personal cost when it confronts a wrong done by a person with power? Are there places where we need to tell the truth to confront an injustice, even when it may come at personal cost?

**First Reading: Amos 7:7-15** *Amos is not the kind of prophet attached to temples or royal courts. Rather, he is an ordinary farmer from Judah (the southern kingdom) called by God to speak to Israel (the northern kingdom). God's word of judgment through Amos conflicts with the king's court prophet Amaziah, whom Amos encounters at Bethel.*

<sup>7</sup>This is what [the Lord GOD] showed me: the Lord was standing beside a wall built with a plumb line, with a plumb line in his hand. <sup>8</sup>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;

<sup>9</sup>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."

<sup>10</sup>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. <sup>11</sup>For thus Amos has said,

'Jeroboam shall die by the sword,  
and Israel must go into exile  
away from his land.'

<sup>12</sup>And Amaziah said to Amos, "O seer, go, flee away to the land of Judah, earn your bread there, and prophesy there; <sup>13</sup>but never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king's sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom."

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

**Gospel Reading: Mark 6:14-29** *As Jesus and his disciples begin to attract attention, Mark recalls the story of John the Baptist's martyrdom. Like John, Jesus and his disciples will also suffer at the hands of those opposed to the gospel of salvation.*

<sup>14</sup>King Herod heard of [the disciples' preaching,] for Jesus' name had become known. Some were saying, "John the baptizer has been raised from the dead; and for this reason these powers are at work in him." <sup>15</sup>But others said, "It is Elijah." And others said, "It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old." <sup>16</sup>But when Herod heard of it, he said, "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised."

<sup>17</sup>For Herod himself had sent men who arrested John, bound him, and put him in prison on account of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because Herod had married her. <sup>18</sup>For John had been telling Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." <sup>19</sup>And Herodias had a grudge against him, and wanted to kill him. But she could not, <sup>20</sup>for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he protected him. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed; and yet he liked to listen to him. <sup>21</sup>But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his courtiers and officers and for the leaders of Galilee. <sup>22</sup>When his daughter Herodias came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests; and the king said to the girl, "Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it." <sup>23</sup>And he solemnly swore to her, "Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom." <sup>24</sup>She went out and said to her mother, "What should I ask for?" She replied, "The head of John the baptizer." <sup>25</sup>Immediately she rushed back to the king and requested, "I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter." <sup>26</sup>The king was deeply grieved; yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he did not want to refuse her. <sup>27</sup>Immediately the king sent a soldier of the guard with orders to bring John's head. He went and beheaded him in the prison, <sup>28</sup>brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl. Then the girl gave it to her mother. <sup>29</sup>When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb.

## Dream Job?

- Do you have a dream job? It could be a favorite job you once had or maybe one you wish you had.
- It's summertime. Maybe it was a short-term summer job.

Today's two passages both talk about having a particular job. The Old Testament passage from Amos and the gospel text from Mark are both stories about someone called to a particular job. It's the job of being a prophet.

In the first reading, the prophet is Amos. In the second reading from Mark, John the Baptist is the prophet. I don't think anyone would call this a dream job.

Who would want that job?

Basically no one. It's not a job you would seek out or apply for. There aren't stacks of resumes on the desk of the HR hiring manager for this one. There has to be something compelling for you to take on this role. It's one to which you get called. Even then, over and over again in the Old Testament, people didn't want the job even when directly called.

We recalled the story of Jonah during this week's Tuesday Bible study. God called Jonah to go deliver a message to the people of Nineveh, and Jonah went in the exact opposite direction. Instead of trekking across land to go to Nineveh, he got in a boat and tried to run from God's call. He didn't not want to deliver that message from God.

### What's the role or job of a prophet?

Let's look at the Amos text to see how that is described. . .

Did you see the repetition in the first two lines? Amos sees the Lord standing beside a wall built with a *plumb line*. Amos sees God standing beside the wall with a *plumb line* in God's hand.

"Amos, what do you see?"

"A *plumb line*." (Amos 7:7-8).

(*Plumb line* is used 4 times in 2 verses.)

*Show the plumb line I've borrowed from Grace and her son Scott. I'll have it placed on a table I've set up next to the ambo, along with a child's play brick.*

A plumb line is a tool used by a carpenter or stone or brick mason. The plumb line has a plumb bob hanging from it. When the plumb line is attached to an elevated point, then the plumb bob hangs freely and the carpenter or mason is able to determine if the wall is straight, plumb, and level.

If you hammer in a nail at a particular spot and then hammer in a second nail at the same height at the other end of where you intend your wall to go and then attach your line with the plumb bob, then you can see if each brick you place is vertically and horizontally in the right place.

The plumb bob is a metaphor to describe the role of a prophet.

"Then the Lord said, "See, I am setting a plumb line in the midst of my people Israel;" (Amos 7:8).

Sometimes people think of a prophet as one who can predict the future—as one who has such insight as to know what's going to happen. Rather than that, the role of a prophet as described by this text is to hold up the plumb line so that people can see themselves more clearly. The role of the prophet is to be a *messenger* from God—and even more pointedly than that, **to be a truth teller**. It is to be a truth teller even when that message sounds harsh or is hard to hear.

The role of the prophet is, as one of our Bible study participants said this week, is to hold up the plumb line and say, if it's true, "You're out of line!" The role of a prophet is to deliver God's message and to tell the truth so that the people may be drawn back to God's way.

## Do People Want to Hear the Truth?

Do people want to hear the truth? Reflected in this story is the observation that most people want to continue doing what they're doing and don't want to be confronted with the truth if it creates discomfort or if they're benefiting from the way things are.

In the Amos passage, the priest Amaziah doesn't want to hear what Amos has to say. He tries to discredit Amos. He wants to get rid of him by reporting to King Jeroboam about him and telling Amos something like, "You don't belong here; you're an outsider. We're from the North. We don't want you from the South. Go back to Judah and don't come back" (v. 12).

## It can be hard for us to hear the truth. Here's a Church Congregation that avoided difficult conversations.

Not wanting to hear a hard message, even when it's the truth, is not just something that happens in this story. We do it, too. . .

You may have seen over the years how church congregations often don't want to hear news if it might make them uncomfortable. I know an interim pastor who was recently called to serve a congregation. She wrote that, "When I interviewed, the one thing they asked me to help them explore is what they perceive as a high turnover of clergy over the last years."

I started a new interim position in January. At the end of April, I found out that I needed a knee replacement. I scheduled it for late June to give us time to work something out. I outlined 4 options, 3 of which concluded with my return after surgery. Of course, given their history, they chose the fourth option of termination. It is within their right according to the interim covenants that our synod uses.

*I omitted another part of the story for brevity.*

### My reply to her post:

Here is why they have pastors with short tenures: They don't listen to them! They are determined to do their own thing rather than listen to pastoral wisdom. (Interim pastors have been trained to help congregations in transition.) They appear impulsive and oriented to the short-term. They think they're just moving on, but they're really getting more stuck. They expressed the intent to learn why they have short pastorates, but then they ignored what they had said.

Though her story is of course of the church she has served, the general circumstance could really be any church, which is part of the point—to see and assess how we may do the same thing ourselves, which is to ask for information and then either avoid hearing it or dealing with it.

## What about the Gospel passage?

The gospel text is about John the Baptizer as a prophet. It's a reminder that being a truth teller or prophet can come at personal cost. This passage tells the story

about how John lost his life when his truth telling got him in trouble with Herodias, the wife of Herod, the ruler or “tetrarch” of the region of Galilee.

This is an interesting story for the gospel writer Mark to include. One of the things I have repeatedly pointed out as we’ve read many passages in Mark over recent weeks is that Mark is action-oriented—things happen immediately, for instance, and he’s usually sparse with details. He’s concise.

And yet this is a passage with 16 verses and only one brief mention of Jesus. There’s this mention as the passage opens that Herod heard of the disciples’ teaching because Jesus was becoming well-known. And then the rest of the passage is all about John and his death.

Knowing that Mark is typically so brief and concise would make you observe, **“Hmm, that’s odd—if Mark is usually so brief and to the point, why does he spend all this time talking about John rather than Jesus?”**

I think it’s Mark using John to draw a parallel to Jesus. In the preceding section of Mark chapter 6, which we read last week when Pastor Carl was preaching, Jesus talks about how he has been received by his hometown. Jesus says, “Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown. . .” (Mark 6:4) Jesus self-identifies as a prophet.

Mark is using the story of John as prophet to tell us something about Jesus, too. Both are prophets. Both have this job of telling the truth in order that people would see that their lives are “out of line” or out of plumb and be drawn back to God’s way.

And, for both John and Jesus, delivering that message would come at personal cost.

### **Here's a Truth-Teller.**

People who are called to be truth-tellers often don’t want that role. In the reading from Amos, Amos wants to go back to his “regular” job—his “day job.” He says, “I’m not a prophet or a prophet’s son. I’m a herdsman, a ‘dresser of sycamore trees’” (v. 14).

He didn’t appoint himself or apply for the job; he was called by God: He says, **“The Lord took me from following the flock: ‘Go, prophesy to my people Israel’”** (v. 15).

There is something compelling from outside themselves that urges them.

Here’s a modern-day truth teller who didn’t wish for the role, but who couldn’t turn aside from responding when confronted with a particular situation.

**This is US representative Andy Kim from New Jersey.** This picture was taken on January 6 in the US Capitol.



- This picture captures a simple act. In a simple, but symbolically powerful way, he is addressing the wrong that took place in the US Capitol on January 6 of this year. There was a big mess in the capitol that day and he was compelled to help clean up the mess.

**Rep. Andy Kim, in his own words, from his post July 6, 2021, on his Facebook page, “Andy Kim for Congress”**

Six months ago, today I wore this blue suit as I cleaned the Capitol after the insurrection, now I just donated it to the Smithsonian. January 6th must never be forgotten. While some try to erase history, I will fight to tell the story, so it never happens again. Let me share with you my story.

When the Smithsonian asked me to donate the blue suit, I thought about how the suit itself is unremarkable. Bought off-the-rack at J.Crew during a holiday sale. I wanted a bright blue new suit to wear to Biden’s inauguration. Then January 6 happened. I woke with the news of the wins in Georgia. I decided to wear the blue suit. I bought it to be a suit of celebration, and I thought what better way to give the suit meaning than to wear it when I confirm the electoral college and then later to the inauguration.

Like my suit, what I did on Jan 6 on its face was unremarkable. I saw a mess and cleaned it. I wanted to right the wrongs of that day as quickly and as tangibly as I could. Neither my suit nor my actions are on their own worthy of memory, but the story didn’t end there.

The last time I wore the blue suit wasn’t January 6th, it was January 13th. I wore it when I walked onto the House floor to cast my vote for impeachment. The suit still had dust on the knees from January 6th. I wore it so I would have no doubt about the truth of what happened.

When I got home, I vowed to never wear the suit again. I even considered throwing it away. It only brought back terrible memories. I could never separate that suit from the shamefulness of January 6th. I hid it in the back of the closet as I never wanted to see it again. But then something happened. In the following days, I started to receive cards from all over the country. Thousands of them. Many from kids. Strangers who felt compelled to tell me how they felt when they saw the photo of me. They talked about the blue suit. The suit meant something different to them than it did to me.

People wrote saying the blue suit gave them a sense of resilience and hope. For me, I was in a tough place. In days after January 6th, I had an unshakable regret that I didn't do more to keep people safe. But feeling of hope/resilience in the cards helped me feel stronger. Thank you.

The Smithsonian called later in January. To be honest, I was confused when they called. I wasn't thinking about how the day would be remembered as I was still living it. In fact, after the call, I had to pull over on the side of I-95 as I started to tear up uncontrollably while driving home. I was still not ok. When the Smithsonian requested the suit, I tried to imagine what an exhibit about January 6th would look like. Perhaps it would have broken glass from shattered doors, torn flags and signs. Video of the mob trying to hijack our democracy. But there was so much more to that day.

The story of that day wasn't just destruction. There was hope and resilience. The Capitol Police were heroes that saved lives. Colleagues and staff showed bravery. I hope those stories are told. They help tell a story of hope and resilience on one of the darkest days in our democracy. I told the Smithsonian yes to donating the blue suit because the telling of the story of January 6th isn't optional, it is necessary. There are many stories of January 6th. Mine is just one. We cannot heal as a nation unless we have truth. Let truth be truth.

There are those trying to erase what happened, voting against commissions/committees aimed at documenting history. They say just move on and turn the page. But I say, you can't turn the page of American history until you write the page first.

Instead of trying to erase history they don't like after the fact, politicians should just act in a way that doesn't produce such shameful results. It's not hard to not incite or cover up an insurrection. The Smithsonian is entrusted to help tell the story of America. It isn't always a pretty story, but it is an unfinished story with the persistent hope that it will improve and that we can repair our faults. More importantly, it is our story. It is shared truth binding us as one.

Patriotism isn't to think we are infallible; it is to know we make mistakes but to love our nation and one another with care enough to fix the injustices that remain. To know our resilience. To have humility to know that we are a part of something bigger than all of us. It'll be surreal to one day take my kids to the Smithsonian and show them the blue suit behind glass. I hope they grow to know the truth of January 6th, but I also hope the story ultimately is one of hope and resilience. I hope that is what they and others see in the blue suit. **~END of Rep. Kim's reflection.**

A couple things strike me about what Andy Kim did, both on January 6 and recently:

- His act that day was nearly without notice and without fanfare. There seems to be only one other person in the photo. Had the photographer not captured the moment, we likely would not have known about it and I suspect that that would

have been just fine with Rep. Kim; he didn't do it to garner a headline or make himself known.

- He cleaned up because it was the right thing to do. Because it was a response to the disruption that had taken place earlier in the day. It was a simple act of declaration that what had taken place earlier was defiling a sacred place and he wished to address that by cleaning up.



## Wisdom and Courage

Being a truth-teller is not an easy job and people don't really sign up for it. They get *called* to do that. I don't know what Andy Kim's expectations were when he ran for office. . . I appreciate now, that having had this role sort of thrust upon him, he has become a truth-teller.

In our national political discourse, there are, of course, many different voices clamoring for our attention and claiming to be the truth. I pray that we may have the wisdom to sort out the voices and determine what is the truth, even when that is yucky and uncomfortable. I think that he is a truth-teller and I appreciate that he has told the story of the blue suit.

May we have courage to hear the message delivered by truth-tellers—that we may be drawn back to being in line with how God would have us live.