

## Sermon: Building with a Plumb Line

Year B, Proper 10

[Amos 7:7-15; Psalm 85:8-13; Ephesians 1:3-14; Mark 6:14-29](#)

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Quick show of hands. Who understood the Amos passage better than the one from Ephesians? Yeah, me too. So let's start with what we understand. We can tell Amos is warning King Jeroboam that things are headed off the rails. It's a funny kind of prophecy because Israel's doing well, economically, politically. According to the head priest at the chief shrine at Bethel, that last thing they need is some mouthy wannabe prophet threatening homeland security.

Amos says, *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."*

(Amos 7:8-9). What does a plumb line do? Right, tells you how close to true vertical something is. What's it made out of? Right, a string and lead. Not exactly high tech. What does it mean to you that God is setting a plumb line in the middle of the people of Israel? [Discussion]

Now, suppose I tell you that this whole plumb line thing was something introduced during the Middle Ages. The word that is translated "plumb line" only appears in the Old Testament and only in a few places. So think about that for a minute. How do we know how to translate it if it's only used in one place? It's pretty hard to develop a context. What we do know is it refers to a kind of metal. It's kind of like another Hebrew word that we know means lead. But it's much closer to other words that mean something else. In the Middle Ages, some rabbinic scholars decided that it must mean lead because the weight on the end of the string for most plumb lines is lead and you use plumb lines to build walls. Makes all the sense in the world.

It's just that the mystery word is closest to a word that the Akkadians used that means "tin".<sup>1</sup> The Akkadians were the people who became the Assyrians and the Babylonians. They were a great trading people and connected the Middle East to the Far East for centuries.

So what if this word that we guessed meant "lead" really meant "tin", especially if it's coming from a trading language of the region, especially from a people who are enemies of Israel? What if I reminded you that bronze is 12% tin. As far as we can tell, there was no tin in the Middle East. It all had to be imported either from Central Asia or Northern and Western Europe. The top armaments were all bronze. You needed tin if you were going to keep a homeland like Israel safe in the tough neighborhood between Egypt and Assyria.

So if the word means "tin" then God is talking about walls made of tin. You can look at that a couple of ways. Either they buckle easily and they're lousy at defense. Or they represent a desperate situation because God is tying up all the tin they need to make bronze and they will have almost nothing to defend themselves with. Either way, it can't be good, because Amos is using the word for tin that comes from Israel's enemies and former trading partners, the Assyrians.

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<sup>1</sup> William Lee Holladay, William Lee. 1970. "Once more, 'anāk = 'tin', Amos 7:7-8." *Vetus Testamentum* 20, no. 4, (1970): 492.

OK, that's history. We're sitting in a church with tin walls. What does it feel like to know that just about every other church will not even go into the mistranslation of "lead" for "tin"? Does it make you feel a little bit special? Maybe a little tickled that this one tiny corner of the Bible, that took place about 750 BCE and was written down probably 200 - 300 years later has a totally flukey connection to a decision made in 1903 to spend \$935 to improve the interior of the Congregational Church?<sup>2</sup> But it gets better, right? World War II needed tin for armaments as well. People were melting down all sorts of things to contribute to the war effort. But these tin walls survived. Or when the Methodist and Congregational churches merged, who's to say that they would have necessarily kept this building and not the one that is the Public Library. Look at it another way, of all of you who weren't born in Brookline, me included, how many of you could easily have gone somewhere else when you decided to move here? Of all of you who were born here, how many of you have more than two best friends who have moved away?

There are so many other ways this could have gone, right? But this is the way it went.

The passage from Ephesians is the opposite of the passage from Amos. It's dense and confusing and it's at the heart of a concept called election. Election is the idea that God has chosen people. Sometimes that's combined with a concept that says God chose certain people and other people are condemned. Sometimes that's combined with a concept that the chosen people were chosen from the founding of the world. Sometimes that's combined with the concept that everyone is chosen, no matter what. Hitler is just as chosen as Gandhi.

But all the versions of election say that God chose, that the person didn't have much to do with it. So all the versions of election have to face the problem that if God chose, and the person doesn't can influence the choice, then why bother to be righteous, why remain in right relationship with God and God's creation?

There's a lovely logical line of argument that has been chasing its tail for centuries. It goes something like this. If you believe that some people are chosen and some people are not, you won't find out which you are until after you've lived this life. If you were chosen, then you have been given such a gift that you cannot possibly do anything to deserve, no matter how righteously you lived your life, so in gratitude alone, you should live a righteous life. If you're not chosen, well, it doesn't matter how you live your life. So live righteously. You'll be no worse off than you would have been otherwise and might be much happier once you find out the answer. Since you can't know until after you die, the thinking goes, live righteously. There's no downside and tons of upside.

Personally, I believe in universal election. God chooses everyone. That means Hitler and every awful person. I don't know how to explain it. I'm glad I don't have to figure it out. If it were up to me, they wouldn't be chosen. It's just that I know that I don't deserve to be chosen and if we went by human standards, no one deserves to be chosen.

When we heard God ask Job a few weeks ago, "*Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding.* (Job 38:4)" that's what I think God was talking about. How can our limited human mind and soul possibly imagine what God has done? We can't. We should just be grateful that God grades on a curve. It is such an immense gift and we

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<sup>2</sup> Edward E. Parker, *History of Brookline, Formerly Raby, Hillsborough County, New Hampshire, with Tables of Family Records and Genealogies*. Published by the town around 1914. 273.

should live our lives praising God that such a gift has been given to someone like us. Living righteously, in right relationship with God and God's creation, is the least we can do.

Many of you know there was a terrible accident on Route 13 this week, when a car went over the middle line and collided with two motorcycles. All three motorcyclists were killed. As I understand it, the scene itself was a pretty tough one for our first responders, even if none of the people involved were from Brookline.<sup>3</sup> I haven't heard of an official cause of the accident, although initial reports ruled out drugs and alcohol.<sup>4</sup> Everyone in here has been on Route 13. Everyone here has had people they love driving on Route 13. So we have a bunch of rules. No texting and driving. No drinking and driving. No *anything* and driving. Just drive. We make these sets of rules so that the people we love come home safe to us. So when something like what happened on Tuesday happens, we want to know why it happened, so we can add to the list of rules that should keep everyone safe.

There are so many ways it could have gone and yet we've ended up in a church with tin walls reflecting on a piece of Scripture mistranslated about tin walls. There are so many ways the event on Route 13 could have gone that didn't end in tragedy and yet it did. Those two collections of random coincidences feel completely different. The accident on Route 13 evokes a response more like the one we have to the idea of election: What are the rules? How do I influence the outcome I want?

It's just that we already know the rules. They are rules about mass and momentum, about the tensile strength of steel, about how much energy muscle and bone can absorb and stay together well enough to contain life. They are the rules laid out in Newtonian physics, although they were the rules long before anyone worked out a formula to describe them. They are the rules that control our world. God gave us a world based on those rules, gave us brains and curiosity to figure them out, talents to build machines that can go at speeds that underline the relentlessness of those rules.

God also gave us the opportunity to live righteously with those rules, to live in right relationship with those rules. That means we find out what caused this particular tragedy and see if there is something we can do differently with the road or the vehicles or the drivers so that we become less likely to grieve for the consequences of the rules of mass and momentum. We reach out to those affected by the accident, especially the first responders. They carry a special burden because they had to handle the result of those rules for all of us and they should know that we are grateful. We reach out to those for whom this accident provokes echoes of their own losses, so that they know they are not alone in remembering other times when loss came suddenly.

I so wanted to close today by pointing to the hidden specialness for everyone here today thinking about Amos and God's walls of tin. We like the buzz we get knowing that there's that hidden corner of the Bible that so few other people are going to see. It was such a weird and enormous collection of seemingly random chances that brought that specialness to the surface today. We can't explain it. But we can be grateful for it. We can praise God for it. We can let the pleasure we feel from realizing that specialness lead us to care more for the building or for the people in it.

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<sup>3</sup> Australian Broadcasting Commission, "Australian skydivers Clay Anderson, Lisa Perdichizzi killed in US motorcycle crash", ABC News, <http://mobile.abc.net.au/news/2015-07-17/australian-skydivers-killed-in-us-motorcycle-crash/6627440?section=nt> (accessed July 18, 2015).

<sup>4</sup> Ray Brewer, "2 Motorcyclists Killed in Brookline Crash", WMUR News 9, <http://www.wmur.com/news/2-motorcyclists-killed-in-brookline-crash/34174888> (accessed July 18, 2015).

Or for the people outside it who might want to share in this specialness. Or might want to seek to discover their own specialness.

But the accident on Route 13, with its unique combination of circumstances, gave us an equally unlikely, equally special event, for which we are not at all grateful.

We sang about that road *that's ever winding, that never ends, and yet is leading us home*.<sup>5</sup> Living in right relationship with each other means living so that no matter what happens on the journey, joy or tragedy, we are grateful to be on the journey with the people around us and with our God. When we lean against a nice cool tin wall and rest for a while in the comfort of the amazing grace that our chains are gone, the amazing grace that surrounds us at every moment, we know that we are not resting alone.

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<sup>5</sup> Third Day, *Revelation*, Essential, 2008.