

Text Amos 7:7-15; Psalm 85:8-13; Ephesians 1:3-14; Mark 6:14-29
Theme Plumb with ...
Subject Death of John the Baptist
Occasion 6th Sunday after Pentecost – July 16, 2006 – Peace – Pella

On this hot summer weekend, with no relief in sight, we have before us two hot passages we teach and believe they are the living Word of God for us.

Each invites us to consider what it is to be plumb

Not a plum but to be plumb

The question is plumb with ... plumb with what?

Our first hot text comes from Amos. A preface to the book of Amos includes this: *“Amos was called by God from a shepherd’s task to the difficult mission of preaching harsh words in a smooth season. He denounced Israel as well as its neighbors for reliance upon military might, and for gross injustices in social dealings, abhorrent immorality, and shallow, meaningless piety.”* (NRSV, “Preface to Amos,” p. 1170)

Amos prophesies,

**"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."**

Amos announced these words in Israel in middle of the 8th century BCE during a time when Israel’s borders were as large as they had ever been during a time of post-war prosperity

- when the Assyrians to the north had so much internal trouble they had to give up war with Israel
- when King Jeroboam II had brought to an end a century and a half war with the Syrians

Luxury like that under Solomon had returned to Israel

(In the Golden Age of the Dutch, the 17th century, Jan Steen produced more the one painting entitled “Of Luxury Beware”)

The Lord announced through Amos,

See, I am setting a plumb line in the midst of my people Israel

No where else in scripture does this image appear

[You have the image of a plumb-line there on the worship folder cover]

Builders, especially masons, use a plumb-line to keep construction square

A vertical line is set and then horizontal lines are based on it for every row of brick

The image of a plumb-line brings to mind the phrase *“plumb with the world”*

Building plumb with the world surrenders to the powerful pull of gravity

Building out of plumb requires all sorts of reinforcement

The Leaning Tower of Pisa is way out of plumb – who knows for how long?

Amos announces this image from God and presumably everyone understood

But wonder with me “Plumb with ...” plumb with what?

Amos wasn’t talking about gravity but he was challenging with metaphor the notion of being “plumb with the world”

“Plumb with the world” means the values of the world determine straight & true
Jeroboam II and his cabinet were leading Israel that way – plumb with the world – living by their own measure of plumb

- There was veneer of self-satisfaction at what they supposed they had accomplished – they had forgotten the *faith of their fathers*
- They assumed their prosperity was due to their effectiveness at keeping ritual but they did not worship – their hearts were not in it
- They had become syncretistic in their worship using Baal rituals
- They exploited holy sites, the marketplace and courts for their benefit at the expense of the people

Charles Kraft explains it this way,

“Amos foresaw that their rude awakening was at hand in a world-wide movement of punishing judgment, a deadly ‘day of Yahweh’ which would mean the death of the nation (of Israel) at the hands of a God-empowered invading enemy” (*Interpreter’s One-volume Commentary on the Bible*, p. 465)

Amos announced, “Israel! You’re out of plumb!”

Amos holds out some hope if Israel turned to **seek the Lord** (5:6), and if they **let justice roll down like waters** (5:24).

He says as much in the 5th chapter

Hate evil, and love good, and establish justice in the gate; it may be that the LORD, the God of hosts, will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph. (5:15)

That’s the plumb-line that God has revealed to Amos – it is the only hope for Israel

The *faith of their fathers*: **hate evil, love good, establish justice in the gate** (which is to say, justice for all as soon as people enter the city) – maybe then some hope

Surely others had noticed but it was Amos, the first great prophet since Elisha, who breaks a century of prophetic silence by sounding the alarm: “*Israel! You’re out of plumb!*”

Amos would be followed by Hosea, Isaiah, and Micah

But by 721 BCE Israel falls and many are taken away as captives

Amos was sent into exile to Judah before all this happened

His prophecy sounds loud and strong through history

The plumb-line is crisp and clear through God’s prophet Amos

Hate evil, and love good, and establish justice in the gate (5:15a)

John the Baptist is in the company of such prophets – some thought he was Elijah
He preached judgment against Herod (not Herod the Great but one of his sons)

This tetrarch Herod had married his brother Philip's wife.

Marrying his brother's wife would have been fine, even required by Jewish law, if
Philip was dead but Philip was alive – and the marriage was against Roman law

Herod thought he was above the law – that he could do what he wanted
So, like Amos before him, John announced, "*Herod! You're out of plumb!*"

This Herod liked listening to John but he refused to let John undermine him
publicly so he silenced him by putting him in prison

Herod was living under the myth that he had authority over his own life
that he could do whatever he wanted

he'd gotten out of plumb – was drunk on himself

Then came that party where a young girl danced in a way that pleased Herod

He was ready to give her anything, even ½ his kingdom – *as if he could*

With the help of her mother, who had it in for John the Baptist, the girl asked for
the head of John the Baptist on a platter

[We know the horror of such executions; I looked at depictions of this
scene for the cover of the bulletin but I could not bear them.]

Herod's arrogant offer meant the death of one he had preserved in prison

Plumb with his own self-deception he granted "the girls" request

Herod was way out of plumb as a leader

☺ Recently I read about a fellow who sensed employees didn't respect his authority, so
after a staff meeting he went out and bought a sign that read, "*I'm the boss*" and
taped it to his door. At noon he left for lunch and when he returned to his office, he
found a note taped to the sign: "*Your wife called; she wants her sign back.*"

Any hope of living plumb means knowing the pull of power on our lives

When we speak the Apostles' Creed this morning, it is not a prayer but a profession
of our faith to each other

We say together that this is the faith and pull of power in our lives

Over the years I've observed that we all know it but it's easier to say it together than
it is to say it alone – of course it is that way – it's hard to believe alone

When our new facilities are built, you can be sure the builders will use some means to
make certain the building is plumb: a plumb-line or surveyors transom or level

When we enter our new facilities, you can be sure we will be supporting and
developing ministries that are plumb with our vision and mission statements

One of our guiding principles has been "every member a minister"

This is rooted in the faith of our reformation fathers that celebrates the
priesthood of all believers

I have provided you a landscape vision of our new property: I've called it *the Sanctuary*

Underlying this notion is some old poster wisdom:

Ships in harbors are safe but that's not what ships are built for

It will be a safe place for prayer, renewal and training

Let me add to the vision of what the facilities will provide us

Space for more of us to meet where we will

Teach and learn scripture and theology,

Lead and plan mission outreach locally, to Agua Prieta, to Tanzania & more

Host the Food Shelf, Blood drives and the County Nurse

Provide hospitality and host non-profit groups and families

There will be space for us to worship in ways that are both faithful to the historic faith and welcome the diversity of contemporary language, music and technology

There will be space to grow more ministries

Over the last few years the culture at Peace has changed by necessity

We've had to adjust our scheduling to accommodate ministries

We've had to borrow classrooms from Central College

We've had move our expanding confirmation ministry to Sunday evenings

We've had to be expeditious in the kitchen using paper and Styrofoam

One leader observed of these necessities, "*Isn't that what every one else is doing?*"

Yes, but our lineage is not to be plumb with what every one else is doing

The ministries of Peace are always "out of plumb" with the world in order to be "plumb with the gospel"

On Tuesday night the Finance Committee will begin work on preparing the preliminary budget for the coming year – I know there will be an eye toward "lean"

But for a people

thrilled by Christ's saving work,

cognizant of the mission God has prepared for us,

and determined to **hate evil, love good, and establish justice** (5:15a);

I suspect that before the budget process, including the annual fund appeal, is ended in November,

we will fully subscribe every ministry we are called to accomplish in 2007.

The gospel reading began with Herod hearing something that made him think that John the Baptist had been raised from the dead – that's why we got the facts of John's death

What did he hear?

People were being healed by the disciples of Jesus

Jesus told them to and they were out doing it

They were plumb with Jesus

This is exactly how we intend to conduct the ministries of Peace

Plumb with our Lord and Savior

I will be remiss if I neglect to observe how Amos' prophecy challenges the Israel of today
 The book of Amos is ancient among Israelis and lives with authority in their lives
 As Israel now wields war against Lebanon, they are far from plumb with God
 In the best case, the United States has armed Israel for defense
 But repeatedly Israel has been aggressive in their use of American arms
 Israel's retaliation in Gaza and escalation of war with Lebanon is way
 out of plumb with what God demands of Israel through the prophets
 The prophets bring a living word of God to Christians and Jews
 Israel is bringing upon itself its doom through these hostile acts in the region
 It also brings grave danger to its allies

In *Mere Christianity* by C. S. Lewis he teaches that being plumb with God happens on three levels:

In relationships with other individuals
 In relationship to one's self
 And with the whole mission of the people of God

When we go out of plumb in any of these relationships, we begin the slippery slope to destruction

Or as James Weldon Johnson puts it his poem "The Prodigal"

*Smooth and easy is the road
 That leads to hell and destruction.
 Down grade all the way,
 The further you travel, the faster you go.
 No need to trudge and sweat and toil,
 Just slip and slide and slip and slide
 Till you bang up against hell's iron gate*

Being plumb with God comes as a word of judgment from Amos

Please hear it as an invitation – not for perfection but a life of principle
 The principle to **hate evil, love good, and establish justice**

We do this best as *Together We Grow Peace*