

## **“Plumb Line”**

A Sermon Preached by Rev. Young-Mee Park  
At First United Methodist Church of Oak Park  
July 11, 2010

*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. 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. For thus Amos has said, 'Jeroboam shall die by the sword, and Israel must go into exile away from his land.'" And Amaziah said to Amos, "O seer, go, flee away to the land of Judah, earn your bread there, and prophesy there; 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 no prophet, nor a prophet's son; but I am a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees, 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.'" (Amos 7:7-17)*

*Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" He answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live." But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.' Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise." (Luke 10:25-37)*

I am not a huge sports fan. I mean, I do like sports in general, and I do encourage my kids to play sports, but I do not worship sports gods. No doubt, sports help our children not

only to develop physical skills, get exercise, make friends, and have fun, but also to learn to play fair and be a member of a team. Actually, I am a strong believer in sports. Yet, I am not a lounge room sports fan. I rarely stay planted in front of the TV for more than a few minutes.

Well, I think I may be having some conversion experience right now. In the past few weeks, I have been watching games, rather interested, rather enthusiastic, even yelling and screaming, clenching my fists or jumping up and down. How many of you have been enjoying the World Cup Soccer games recently? I know that the final match will be played this afternoon, but don't worry. You will have plenty time before the game for worship and for our Summer Feast that will follow our worship today.

Soccer certainly is not like baseball, one of the American's favorite pastimes. It is not as rational or as quantifiable as baseball. Soccer certainly is not like basketball, another favorite pastime of America. The goals are scarce. And because goals are so scarce, it is possible for a team to be outplayed for 89 minutes and yet still score one fluke goal and win the game. One of the columnists at The New York Times even says that soccer is a game that teaches that life is unfair.<sup>1</sup> I am not sure whether I fully agree with him, but I think that I understand what he is saying. I think that to a certain extent, he may be right.

In a game, as well as in life, superior performance does not always translate into victory. In a game, as well as in life, the course can be altered, at any moment, for any reason. In a game, the referees are there to see what is happening in and around play and make sure that the spirit of the game is protected. But alas, they do not and cannot see everything! I am sure they do the best they can to facilitate the smooth running of the game, but they sometimes make disputed, if not downright wrong, calls. Even if they do see a foul play, there is a limit in what they can do! They cannot bring the game back to where it was before the foul play! What is done is done, and the game will take its own course! This is how young, brave, and talented Ghana lost to Uruguay after playing a good and winning game! Of courses, the Ghanaians are devastated, but for the Uruguayans, it was a beautiful game, in which they saw the hand of God and the Virgin Mary. Fascinating, isn't it?

But how about real life? Is there someone out there to referee, to see what is happening in our every day lives and to protect the Spirit of Life? If so, is that referee just and trustworthy, all-knowing and all-powerful? Or, is that referee of our life just like a referee we see in a soccer game, with a limited vision, limited knowledge, and limited power?

This, my friends, is a serious question, and a question that makes many of us uneasy. Uneasy, in part because some of us feel that life is unfair, indeed, and the referee, whoever that is, is not trustworthy, indeed. And somehow, we feel that something is wrong here. We'd rather ignore the question itself. For others, it is just the idea of a referee or an outside authority that makes them uneasy. We do not want to judge others; we do not want to be judged by others, either, do we?

Yet, however uncomfortable we may feel, the question is put before us in both of our lessons today. I acknowledge, referee is not exactly a term we find in our lessons, or in the Bible in general. The word we often find in the Bible is "judgment" or "judge." And yet, in our lessons today, we do not even find that word. However, I think that judgment is the theme found in both lessons. Judgment is the theme that connects the two.

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<sup>1</sup> "A World Cup Mentality" by David Brooks and Gail Collins, in New York Times, June 16, 2010.

Our first lesson begins with a vision of the Lord God standing beside a wall with a plumb line in hand. I don't know how many of you have ever seen one, but a plumb line is a very simple, and yet, essential tool for construction workers. Probably no longer in use these days, but I remember seeing one in my childhood in Korea. A plumb line is a string with a weight fixed to its end. Due to gravity, it gives the builder a true measure of that which is supposed to be straight.

With this plumb line in hand, God declares to Amos, the prophet, *"See, I am setting a plumb line in the midst of my people Israel. I will never pass them by."* Then, God pronounces judgment against Israel. There will be desolation. God will rise against the royal family with the sword. A terrible, horrible judgment, isn't it? Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, which means a high-ranking religious official, did not like the message at all. *"Get out of here!"* He confronts the prophets, *"Where do you think you are? This is a royal shrine. This is the king's chapel. Don't ever show your face here again; don't ever do your preaching here again."*

I don't know about you, but I shudder at these words. I shudder at the thought of a religion that has become subservient to power. It is clear that Amos and Amaziah do not serve the same Lord.

Our Gospel lesson is Jesus' story of the Good Samaritan. It is such a well-known story that I don't think I need to tell the story again. But let me share with you where I see judgment in the story. No harsh language is found in the story. No fire, no brimstone, either. Yet, judgment is rendered, or displayed, or enacted, against a priest and a Levite who pass by the wounded man in the ditch.

Did you notice that in both texts put before us today, God's judgment is not against someone outside of the faith of Israel and the church? Actually, not only in the texts put before us today, but in many different places in the Bible, when God is in a judgmental mode, the harsh condemnations are not so much for those outside of the faith. These condemnations are for Israel and the church, and I should say, especially the clergy! What an irony! When we would like to think that we, the clergy, we, the Christians, are entitled to divine favor!

Good for you if you feel troubled, uncomfortable! But you see? We serve a God who loves us enough not to leave us to our own devices. We serve a God who comes to us and speaks truth to us. We serve a God who stands among us with a plumb line in hand, that we may be built into an edifice that will stand. God's judgment of us is a sign of God's faith in us. God believes in us more than we believe in ourselves.

Like Israel before us, the church lives under the judgment of God. We are accountable, not simply to our own opinions about what is right and what is not, but to God's judgment, not to the general standards of the society around us, but to God's plumb line. Thanks be to God for the grace of the plumb line! Thanks be to God! Amen.