

July 15, 2018 – Amos 7:7-15 & Mark 6:14-29

My wife and I enjoy watching home improvement shows. “This Old House” type shows where they do massive renovations and additions and such. And we were watching an episode of one recently where the home was just a mess. The wiring had been spliced like a Christmas tree, heating ducts had been blocked off, there was asbestos everywhere. The home was a disaster.

But the biggest, most dangerous problem of all wasn't found until halfway through the project. In the course of removing asbestos from the walls, they were forced to gut the entire finished basement. And sitting behind the drywall was a problem that could have literally brought the entire house down.

The foundation wall was bulging. The brick had been pushed almost five inches inward, the weight of earth on the outside pressing against the hundred year old wall until it threatened to collapse. It was obvious to see. All you had to do was hold a straight edge to it to see how far it had moved. They could have done all the repairs in the world to the rest of the house, but if that crooked wall hadn't been repaired, the entire building would have eventually collapsed in on them.

Good walls are essential to any building. They need to be straight and vertical and true. They can't carry any weight if they're not. And there are many ways to determine whether a wall is straight and vertical. Nowadays, builders like to use fancy laser levels to check. But before we had such gadgets, they would use something called a plumb line.

What's a plumb line? Well, basically, it's just a string with a weight on the end of it. If you want to make sure a wall is good, you drop it from the top of a wall and wait for it to stop swinging. If the wall is straight and vertical, it will be perfectly parallel to the plumb line. It will be “plumb,” as we still say.

In our Old Testament lesson today, we hear a description of the vision the prophet Amos had regarding a plumb line. But to fully understand it we not only need to know what a plumb line is, but why the prophet Amos is even there in the first place.

You see, Amos is in the city of Bethel in the Northern Kingdom. For over a hundred years now, Israel has been a divided nation. Judah, to the south, has remained loyal to the line of David, while Israel to the north has rebelled and set up their own king.

Except that, in the process, they've had to do more than just set up their own king. They've had to set up their own religion. Jerusalem, the Temple, and all the priests are in Judah, after all. You can't very well declare war on a nation and then ask permission to worship in their capital city.

So the Northern Kingdom builds their own temple in Bethel, occupied by their own priests and their own sacrificial system. And they think that what they've got is a perfect replacement for everything they had in Jerusalem. But it's not. Because everybody knows it's a sham. It's a crude facsimile of the real thing. God isn't in this temple. So there's no reason to respect it.

And before long, the temple in Bethel becomes corrupt. Canaanite idols appear inside it. Baal. Molech. Asherah. Canaanite worship practices become the norm. Prostitution. Violence. Greed. Within just a few generations, the temple of Bethel is no longer a temple to Yahweh. The Lord. The God of Israel. It's a temple to sin and idolatry and everything that God hates.

And so Amos arrives to say that God has dropped a plumb line among them. They still call themselves Israelites, after all. They still claim to worship the God who brought them out of Egypt. Who gave them the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai. Who taught them how to be His people, as He promised to be their God.

If they're going to claim to be His people, then they have to follow the standard He has set for them. If they are going to leave the house of David and of Judah and build their own new house, then it better be up to God's standards. The walls they build for themselves better be plumb.

But when God drops a plumb line among them it quickly reveals that they're not. Not even close. They're bulging inward, threatening to collapse under the weight of their sin and idolatry. The temple they have built isn't worth the brick and timber inside it. Because it wasn't built to the Lord's standard. And so He has condemned it to destruction.

It's a harsh lesson. But understandable, in a way. What good would it do anyone to leave a dangerous house standing? A house on the brink of collapse anyway? If it were in our community, we would gratefully say, "Tear it down! It's a hazard! It's an eyesore! Get rid of it!" This is how God viewed the idolatry of Israel. And it makes a certain amount of sense to us.

But we forget that the same plumb line that God dropped in Israel's midst, He's also dropped in our midst. The same standard that God used with the Northern Kingdom, He uses with us as well.

And that standard says things like "You will have no other gods before me. You will not misuse the name of the Lord. You will keep one day holy to the Lord each week. You will honor those in authority over you. You will not hate or murder. You will not dishonor marriage with lust or adultery. You will not take things you have not earned. You will not betray or slander anyone. Nor will you covet the home or spouse or possessions of anyone."

This is God's standard. It's probably around 3,500 years old. And, for that reason, many people say we can ignore it. It's old. It's outdated. It doesn't matter anymore. Things have changed. God is about love and peace and prosperity. He doesn't care about old rules like that. As long as I'm a good person, I'll go to heaven.

The funny thing, though, is that that's exactly what Israel said in the time Amos. "Bah... the Ten Commandments were written 700 years ago. God's Law is old. It's outdated. It doesn't matter anymore. Things have changed. We're basically good people. God won't punish us."

In fact, that's exactly what Herod said in our Gospel lesson. "Bah... adultery? No one cares about adultery anymore. That commandment is 1500 years old. Who cares if I had an affair with my brother's wife? We're in love. God is all about love and peace and prosperity."

And yet, through it all, God's standard never changed. For 3500 years, that plumb line has hung, unmoving, and shown us what is true. For 3500 years people like Amos and John the Baptist and pastors like me have declared the hard truth that if you want to be called one of God's people, you will be judged against God's Law. He is going to see if the wall you've built is true.

And I can tell you right now, it's not. Because the same sin that weakened the people of Bethel and weakened Herod has weakened our walls as well. Sin has corrupted everything we've built.

Our lives. Our accomplishments. Our families. All of it is threatening to cave in upon us. Collapse inward, leaving only death behind. We are each a condemned building. And God would be absolutely right to take the wrecking ball to each one of us.

And yet He doesn't. And it's not because we've done such a good job hiding our errors. No, He's seen our faults. He knows our weaknesses. He knows our sin better than we do. But unlike Israel, fit only for destruction, the Master Carpenter has a better solution for our dilemma.

And it's actually the same solution that they found for that pathetic home in that TV show. It was a simple solution, really: just build a second wall inside the first. Straight and vertical. Strong enough to bear the load of not just all the dirt outside the house, but of the original brick wall that was collapsing as well.

God has done the same for us. In our lesson, it says that when Amos saw the vision, God was already standing next to a wall built with a plumb line. A strong wall, perfect, straight, and true.

A wall called Jesus Christ. Whose perfect life was a testimony of God's Law. And whose perfect death made Him a wall for us. So that he now carries the load of our sin. So that he now carries the load of our sinful lives. So that He now carries us and keeps us from the path of destruction.

As Martin Luther famously wrote, a mighty fortress is our God. But He is not just a fortress around us, protecting us from the assaults of the devil. He is also a fortress within us. Holding us up. Protecting us from our own sinful decisions and the weight of our own sinful lives.

Sacrificing his life to give us a brand new foundation. So that when the Father looks at us, he doesn't see a building that needs to be torn down and condemned. He sees only the work of his Son, making us a building fit for eternal life. Making us, indeed, a holy Temple where God dwells with his people.

Where we are no longer rebels who have divided ourselves from him, like Israel once was. But instead, we are a royal priesthood and a holy nation. We are a people redeemed through his Body and Blood. We are a people to whom he gives an inheritance. Sealed with the promise of his Holy Spirit through Baptism.

From the outside, you may look like an old building that just needs to be torn down. You may feel like an old building that just needs to be torn down. But don't lose hope. For the one who holds the plumb line has rebuilt your walls. He has restored your foundation. He has become your cornerstone. And he will support you to the end and for all eternity. Amen.