

Amos 7:7-15

What are the two subjects that we're supposed to avoid in polite conversation? Yep. Religion and politics. And what are the two subjects that we hear about today and through much of the Bible? Religion and politics.

The prophet Amos lived in a difficult time. Following the death of Solomon in 932 BC, Israel had been divided into two separate kingdoms, Israel in the north and Judah in the south. Around 200 years later, in Amos' time, like any siblings, they were still fighting with each other. In fact, almost 1,000 years later in Jesus' time, after both Israel and Judah had been conquered and occupied, the remnants of the old strife were still there. You see, Jerusalem and the Temple were in Judah, and those in Israel were forced to travel into the south to make their offerings, or find another place to worship.

God chose Amos, a shepherd and dresser of sycamore trees from the small Judean town of Tekoa, to go north into Israel and prophesy its downfall, calling for its repentance. It would be like sending someone from Eugene into Idaho to proclaim its downfall. Not too surprisingly, Amos was accused of preaching politics, and told to go home.

Now it's absolutely true that Amos' words had political ramifications. But Amos had been sent to set up a plumb line, and gravity only works in one direction. A foundation either lines up with gravity, or it does not. A wall or fence post is either plumb, or it leans; and if it leans, it will eventually fall. And some walls are more true than others.

Amos the prophet, was not a representative of Judah, who went to Israel to point out how much better Judah was. He went to hold up a plumb line, to let Judah see for itself how it leaned. The problem is that a wall only looks straight until you see it next to something that really is straight. And Israel was way off. We can see it in this same short passage: "never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king's sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom." What was more important, the truth of good and evil, right and wrong, or the king and kingdom?

In his book, *Preaching the Truth in an Age of Alternative Facts*, New Testament scholar Bill Brosend shares some recent quotes from clergy trying to preach in this age:

"Everything I say is being interpreted and analyzed for things I never even thought about. Joshua and the Battle of Jericho has become a commentary on whether or not we should build a wall on the border."

"I read the Beatitudes last Sunday and the tension in the church was palpable. Who knew "Blessed are the peacemakers" were fighting words?"

Jesus knew exactly how they felt. Jesus too lived in a profoundly political world, trying to bring good news to those with their backs against the wall. All that anyone could talk about was how to respond to Rome. The Sadducees said they should go along to get along, and capitulated with Roman rule and adopted Roman culture. The Pharisees doubled down on Jewish cultural identity; they obeyed grudgingly, but they wore their forelocks long and natural and took a knee at the Roman national anthem. The Zealots fought back, inciting riots and uprisings. Everyone was choosing sides.

Herod the tetrarch was a puppet King, who ruled only under Roman sufferance, and whose chief occupation seems to have been enjoying his position. John the Baptizer had come to hold out a plumb line. Herod was a seeker. He was fascinated with John the Baptizer, and knew there was something there, something special. But as we heard in today's story, Herod cared more about the image of the King, than he did about the truth and right and wrong.

So, if politics describes how we live together, and where we place our allegiance, every word of the gospel is profoundly political, because the Gospel is profoundly about how we live together.

"Blessed are the peacemakers", "love your neighbor", "love your enemy", "love one another as I have loved you"; they really are political words. Not because they favor the Pharisees over the Sadducees, but because they are a plumb line, a true and trustworthy guide among people who all believe they are upright. They feel like fighting words, partisan words, when we see that next to them the Pharisees look straighter than the Sadducees. But gravity only works in one direction.

If the Law, Prophets, and Gospel start to sound like fighting words to us, the fault is not with gravity, but with the kings we follow. Sometimes they really are political leaders, or nations or party lines, Jeroboam and Herod and Caesar demanding our loyalty. Sometimes the kings are other things, like technological advancement, the economic system, or global security. Or our kings might be more personal: safety, peace, the American dream, freedom, family community, the old prayer book, or the next prayer book. All of these are good and worthy things. Our job as Christians, though, is to hold up a plumb line next to them, and ask whose sanctuaries and temples they are: God's or our king's.

Is it my own safety I seek, or the safety of every child of God? Do I want the American dream for Americans, or for every person? Will I use freedom to do as I will, or to make others free? Do I attend worship because the service pleases God, or because it pleases me? The gospel only works when it stops being individual and starts being political.

From the beginning in every place and time, the Law, the Prophets, and the Gospel have had profound political implications. But before we hold that plumb line up to another, we need to remember that all politics is local politics, and hold it up to ourselves.

Now that doesn't mean that all of us who are faithful will always stand true and straight. While a plumb line is itself precise, lining something up with it, still requires a keen eye and careful judgement, and even then no picture stays straight, and no foundation escapes some settling. We are all a little off-kilter, some of us more than others.

The good news of the gospel is that the plumb line is not a requirement, but a goal, an end, a destiny, a political platform, "a plan" as Paul writes, "for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth."

The good news of the Gospel is that our true king chose to align himself with us, so that the grace of his straight cross could make us true and worthy to stand before him as citizens of the Kingdom of God.