

THE MORE THINGS CHANGE, THE MORE THEY STAY THE SAME**Sermon for the 7th Sunday after Pentecost, 2021****Amos 7:7-15**

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is the First Reading from before, Amos 7:7-15: ⁷ This is what He showed me: The Lord was standing beside a wall built with a plumb-line. He had the plumb-line in His hand. ⁸ The LORD asked me, “What do you see, Amos?”

I answered, “A plumb-line.”

Then the Lord said: “Look! I am putting a plumb-line among My people Israel. I shall not overlook them any more. ⁹ The high places of Isaac will be made desolate, and the holy places of Israel will be in ruins. I shall use a sword to rise up against the family of Jeroboam.”

¹⁰ Then Amaziah, the priest at Bethel, sent a message to Jeroboam, the king of Israel: “Amos has been conspiring against you in the middle of the family of Israel. The land cannot endure everything that he is saying. ¹¹ For this is what Amos has been saying: ‘Jeroboam will be killed with the sword, and Israel will certainly leave its own land to go into exile.’”

¹² Amaziah told Amos: “Go away, you seer! Run off to the land of Judah! Earn your living over there, and prophesy there! ¹³ You shall never prophesy at Bethel again! For Bethel is a royal sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom.”

¹⁴ Amos answered Amaziah: “I had not been a prophet, and I had not been a disciple of a prophet. For I had been a herdsman, and I had also been taking care of sycamore-fig-trees. ¹⁵ However, the LORD took me away from following the flock, and the LORD told me: ‘Go! Prophesy to My people Israel!’”

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

The more things change, the more they stay the same - so they say. But really? Certainly, the world has changed a lot since the days of the prophet Amos, who lived some 2800 years ago. I’m sure that as a shepherd, Amos never chased after his sheep on a motorbike, or used mechanised machinery to pick and package his figs! Those days were compared to 21st century Australia.

So things do change, but one thing that hasn’t changed is God’s relationship to His people. The LORD had asked Amos to proclaim a message to Israel, and that message is exactly the same today.

Amos was a shepherd and farmer who was called to prophesy during the reigns of Uzziah (792–740 B.C.) in the Southern Kingdom and Jeroboam II (793–753) in the North. During this time both kingdoms were enjoying political stability, which in turn brought prosperity. However, it was also a time of idolatry, extravagance, and corruption. The rich and powerful were oppressing the poor.

Amos was chosen by God to carry His message to the Northern Kingdom. In his dialogue with Amaziah, the priest at Bethel, Amos had said, “I had not been a prophet, and I had not been a disciple of a prophet. For I had been a herdsman, and I had also been taking care of sycamore-fig-trees. ¹⁵ However, the LORD took me away from following the flock, and the LORD told me: ‘Go! Prophesy to My people Israel!’”

Amos was like the apostles of Jesus in the sense that he was not a spokesman for the Lord by his own choice or training. The LORD did not care that Amos was not some highly educated priest or someone who was a powerful and skilful speaker. No, the power lay in the words themselves, because the words Amos was speaking were the words of God.

Amos had received five visions from the LORD concerning the coming judgment of Israel. The vision of the plumb-line, the one we read about today, was the third vision Amos had. In this vision, the Lord Himself appears, standing beside a wall. To impress the vision on Amos, the LORD asks, “**What do you see, Amos?**” Amos answered, “**A plumb-line.**” Amos sees a plumb line, a builder’s tool used to determine a straight, vertical line, in the Lord’s hand.

Then the Lord said: “Look! I am putting a plumb-line among My people Israel. I shall not overlook them any more. ⁹ The high places of Isaac will be made desolate, and the holy places of Israel will be in ruins.” The Lord pictured Himself as a mason laying brick or stone, while the wall represented Israel, the people He had created to receive His covenant. The plumb line was His Law, the standard laid down at Mount Sinai for Israel’s life as His covenant people. The Law revealed Israel’s sin, and what it showed were a people who were like a sagging, crooked wall, ready to be torn down. So the Lord had said, “**I shall not overlook them any more.**”

Israel was guilty of greed, sexual sins, and false worship. They were living contrary to God’s Word. The Lord has measured Israel, and found His people wanting.

While things have changed markedly since the time of Amos, God's Law, people, and sin, hasn't. Today the Lord still uses the same plumb line with us as He did with Israel, that is, the Ten Commandments, and in light of these commandments, how do we measure up? Certainly not vertically perfect. Sagging out of plumb, we have broken and continue to break every one of God's commandments. We sin against our neighbour, and we sin against God in thought, word, and deed. The Commandments show every individual definitely "out of plumb." Our lives are "out of line," like a crooked wall ready to be torn down, and we must hang our heads in shame as we remember that God threatens to punish all who break these commandments.¹

In our time, as in Amos's, refusal to change will bring consequences! As the Lord had said back then, so the following warning is for us today. "**The high places of Isaac will be made desolate, and the holy places of Israel will be in ruins. I shall use a sword to rise up against the family of Jeroboam.**" Failing to match God's "plumb line," has dire consequences. The house of Jeroboam, the king who was responsible for the actions of his people, would be destroyed by the sword. Israel would go into exile, sent away from the Promised Land, no longer being allowed to live there.

Today, God still punishes those who refuse to change their sinful lives. Amos had been prophesying at Bethel, a town where a temple of the Northern Kingdom was located. This should have been a place where the people and the priests understood exactly what he was saying. Remember last Sunday we heard God speak to Ezekiel saying, "*Son of man, I am sending you to the Israelites, to the rebellious nations that have rebelled against Me. They and their fathers have been in revolt against Me to this very day*" (Ezek. 2:3). God's judgment against sin continues to be proclaimed today, but sometimes that means speaking against sins people don't want to hear about. We do not have to reminded of those things that are an abomination to the Lord, but are eagerly accepted by our society.

There can be no doubt that once a nation travels down a path that leads away from the Lord, refusing to repent, that serious consequences will follow - nothing more serious than to be cast forever into eternal hell fire. If anyone thinks that the Lord will stand idly by, then think again. While we know that He is slow to anger², nevertheless, His patience will finally come to an end when He comes again to judge the living and the dead. But until that happens, faithful pastors and followers of Christ, in our daily Christian lives, need to warn and rebuke, just as faithful prophets of old did.

Sadly, in our time, as in Amos's, we know that most will reject God's call to change. Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, ragged about all this to Jeroboam, king of Israel. He said, "**Amos has been conspiring against you in the middle of the family of Israel. The land cannot endure everything that he is saying.**"¹¹ **For this is what Amos has been saying: 'Jeroboam will be killed with the sword, and Israel will certainly leave its own land to go into exile.'**"

Amaziah rejected Amos's proclamation especially for this reason: "**Israel will certainly leave its own land to go into exile.**" God had given the land to Israel, and in Amaziah's opinion, there was nothing that would warrant God taking it away. But Amaziah had forgotten that the land was part of the covenant between God and Abraham, and now the people of the Northern Kingdom had trampled the covenantal relationship with God, making the temple at Bethel a place of pagan worship.

Amaziah told Amos (not very kindly), to "**Go away, you seer! Run off to the land of Judah! Earn your living over there, and prophesy there!**"¹³ **You shall never prophesy at Bethel again! For Bethel is a royal sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom.**" Perhaps Amaziah thought that they could avoid the consequences of sin simply by having Amos cease prophesying at Bethel.

In our time, many still reject God's call to change, so we can expect some of the same rejection by the unbelieving world around us. Those who preach and confess God's Word today will also meet opposition. In countries that have no religious liberty, the state will oppose the preaching of God's law and gospel. In lands where citizens enjoy freedom of conscience, opposition arises from public opinion. But this should come as no surprise. Jesus once warned His disciples: "*No servant is greater than his master. If they persecuted Me, they will persecute you also... They will treat you this way because of My name, for they do not know the One who sent Me,*" (John 15:20-21). Again, "*If the world hates you, know that it has hated Me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you,*" (John 15:18-19). The "hate" displayed to us could be just a cold shoulder like Amaziah's toward Amos, or it could be as violent as the crowd that screamed for Jesus to be crucified.

However, it is not too late. In our time, a change of heart changes everything.

In Amos's time, a change of heart would change God's judgment to forgiveness. Amos spoke to Amaziah saying, "**I had not been a prophet, and I had not been a disciple of a prophet. For I had been a herdsman, and I had also been taking care of sycamore-fig-trees.**"¹⁵ **However, the LORD took me away from following the flock, and the LORD told me: 'Go! Prophesy to My people Israel!'"**

Amos explains that it wasn't his idea to come to Bethel to call the people to repentance. Amos had been living his life as a herdsman and a carer of sycamore figs. Yet the Lord called him away from those vocations, telling him to prophesy to Israel. Why?

¹ Leviticus 26:18; Galatians 3:10

² Psalm 145:8

As we mentioned earlier, Amos's vision of the plumb-line was the third of five visions he had. In his first vision, Amos saw the king's servants taking the early cutting of hay out of a field, and just as the field is greening up again, the LORD sends a plague of locusts. Locusts can totally consume everything green in areas extending over a huge area. The locust swarm strips all the young grass from the fields and is ready to attack the vineyards, olive trees, and orchards. In love for the people of Israel, Amos intercedes with God. He prays that the LORD would forgive Israel's sins and have pity on such an insignificant people. The LORD answers, "*This will not happen*" and He removes the locusts without carrying His judgment to its conclusion. In the second vision too, the destruction has already begun. This time a word is used to describe a court case in progress. The LORD appears as executioner. Armed with the same consuming fire that burned on Mount Sinai³, He demands punishment for Israel's disobedience. The fire licks up the Mediterranean Sea and is ready to devour the land of Canaan, perhaps by searing the fields with a severe drought. Again the prophet intercedes for his people, and again the LORD relents.⁴

Thus the Lord longs to relent from punishing His people. He had sent Amos to declare judgment so that Israel would have a change of heart and turn from their sin back to Him in faith, and He would eagerly forgive!

Today, in our time, a change of heart - *repentance* - still changes God's judgment to forgiveness. God's heart toward us, sinful though we are, is evident in His sending Jesus to die and rise again for us. As Amos interceded for his people in his visions, so the LORD God calls pastors even today to preach His Law and Gospel, to intercede, to warn and rebuke, and this is becoming even more urgent, as we see our nation on its out-of-control spiral away from the LORD. We all have the desire to see a change of heart in our own nation, true sorrow over sin, and lives lived as the LORD wants. Jesus says that "*there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents*" (Luke 15:10). We rejoice too when a sinner repents, because that then opens the opportunity for him to receive the Gospel - the Good News that God has forgiven his sin because of the suffering and death of Jesus Christ – the Great Intercessor. But imagine the rejoicing over a whole nation that repents! And this is our prayer.

All of us here today, through Holy Baptism, have become children of God, and will not suffer the same end as Israel - that of going into exile, because we believe that Jesus has already suffered that exile when He was forsaken by His Father on the cross. Jesus has given us eternal life, and no one can pluck us out of His hand.⁵ We have been forgiven all our sins, and that will never change. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

PRAYER FOR THE SEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Almighty and merciful God, we praise Your holy name. We praise You for Your witness to Yourself in your glorious creation, with all its wisdom and its wonders, and in all the blessings that come to us through them. We thank You, Father, for giving us a clearer and fuller message of Your truth in the Holy Scriptures. By the Spirit who inspired them, make us living stones in Your temple, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets. Above all, centre our lives in Your Son, whom You have sent as the living Word, to convey to all people Your full grace and truth.

We praise You that Your Son became a human being like us. We praise You that He has given us His life of perfect obedience to redeem our lives, and to set His example before us. We praise you that He has died to take on Himself our sins; and that He has risen to give us unending life. We praise You for making these blessings of Christ our own through Baptism and the gift of faith.

Grant that we may grow in them day by day, so that we may always be clothed with His righteousness and live the new life. By Your Spirit, help us to put to death the desires of our sinful natures, to put away all hatred and bitterness, to conquer all evil habits, and to live in fellowship with You.

Spirit of the living God, we praise You for bringing the Church into existence. By Your gracious power, renew it daily in faith and life. Move Your people to offer their whole selves to their Lord and to proclaim His saving love.

Give saving faith to the nations of the earth, that they may acknowledge Jesus Christ as their Saviour and Lord, and live before You in obedience. Bless our country Australia with leaders whose consciences are guided by Your voice, and with citizens whose minds are fixed on doing Your will.

Bless all who are in some special need of Your help. Remember, in particular, those who are sick, or suffering physical or mental distress. Touch them with Your healing love, and show them what great things You have prepared for them.

O God, Creator, Saviour, and Advocate, help us during our days on earth to let Your light transform every area of our lives, and, when death comes, keep us for Your eternal kingdom. These things we ask in the precious name of Jesus Christ, who, together with You and the Holy Spirit, lives and rules, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

³ Exodus 24:17

⁴ Amos 7:1-6

⁵ John 10:28-29

The 7th Sunday after Pentecost

Amos 7:7-15

⁷ This is what He showed me: The Lord was standing beside a wall built with a plumb-line. He had the plumb-line in His hand. ⁸ The LORD asked me, “What do you see, Amos?” I answered, “A plumb-line.”

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Ephesians 1:3-14

³ Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ! ⁴ For before He made the world, His love led Him to choose us in Christ to be holy and blameless in His sight. In love ⁵ He predestined us to be adopted as His own sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with the good pleasure of His will. ⁶ He did this that His glorious grace, which He bestowed on us in His dearly loved Son, might be praised. ⁷ In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, because of God’s rich grace. ⁸ He caused His grace to abound toward us in all wisdom and understanding, ⁹ when He made known to us the mystery of His will. According to His good pleasure it was His purpose in Christ ¹⁰ to manage everything, both in heaven and on earth, in such a way that, when the right time came, He might summarise all things in Christ. ¹¹ In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance. He who carries out everything exactly as His will plans it has predestined us according to His purpose. ¹² He did this that we, who were the first to hope in Christ, might praise His glory. ¹³ When you heard the message of the truth, the Good News that you have been saved and when you became believers, you were also sealed in Him by the Holy Spirit, whom God promised. ¹⁴ That Holy Spirit is the guarantee of our inheritance until God redeems us to be His very own, that His glory may be praised.

Mark 6:14-29

¹⁴ King Herod heard about this. For Jesus’ name had become well known. Some people were saying, “John the Baptist has been raised from the dead, and that is why these miraculous powers are at work in Him.”

¹⁵ Others were saying, “He is Elijah.”

Others were saying, “He is a prophet, like one of the other prophets.”

¹⁶ However, when Herod heard about it, he used to say, “John, the man whom I beheaded, has been raised.”

¹⁷ For Herod himself had sent some men, arrested John and bound him in prison because of Herodias, his brother Philip’s wife, whom Herod had married.

¹⁸ For John used to tell Herod, “It is not lawful for you to have your brother’s wife.” ¹⁹ Herodias held a grudge against John and wanted to kill him but could not do it, ²⁰ because Herod was afraid of John. For he knew that John was a righteous and holy man and he kept protecting him. When he listened to John, he was greatly disturbed and yet he liked to hear him. ²¹ Then an opportune day came on Herod’s birthday, when he made a dinner for his noblemen, his military officers and the leading men of Galilee. ²² When his daughter, that is, the daughter of Herodias, came in and danced, she pleased Herod and those who were sitting at table with him. The king told the girl, “Ask me for whatever you want! I shall give it to you.”

²³ He solemnly swore to her: “I shall give you whatever you ask me for, up to half of my kingdom.”

²⁴ She went out and asked her mother, “What am I to ask for?”

She answered, “The head of John the Baptist.”

²⁵ Immediately the girl hurried in to the king and made her request: “I want you to give me at once on a platter the head of John the Baptist.”

²⁶ Although the king became very sorry, yet, because of his oaths and because of those who were sitting at the table with him, he did not want to refuse her. ²⁷ Immediately the king sent an executioner and ordered him to bring John’s head. He went and beheaded John in the prison, ²⁸ brought his head on a platter and gave it to the girl, and the girl gave it to her mother. ²⁹ When John’s disciples heard this, they came and took away his body and laid it in a tomb.