

**Sermon**  
**Kirk of St James**  
**Sunday, July 14, 2024**  
**Rev. Amanda Henderson-Bolton**

Chad and I have been watching a show on Netflix called “The Mole.” In this series contestants must work together accomplishing missions to help build up the prize money. As they succeed in their challenges they add money to the pot, which sounds like it should be quite straight forward. However, one of the contestants is designated the “mole” and their objective is to sabotage missions and deplete their money while not getting caught. I always find it interesting to watch the game progress. Every season starts out with contestants vowing to add money, do their best, and build up the prize, however, midway through the game everything breaks down. People are willing to sacrifice money and lie to try and get ahead in the game and they ultimately sabotage themselves. What started out with their belief in their strong morals begins to crumble under stress and the hopes of winning the money for themselves. The truth is until we are put under pressure we don’t know how we will react when we are tempted or challenged, and the account we read in Amos today is a prime example.

Here we witness a showdown between Amos the shepherd -turned- prophet, and Amaziah the priest of the most important shrine in the kingdom. “Speaking truth to power has never been easy or risk free...Still, truth being what truth is—and power being what power is—the work remains to be done.” As I have mentioned before being a prophet in Israel is a job no one wants. They are often called to speak truth to people who did not want to hear it and at great personal risk to themselves—much like John the Baptist discovered. Part of the prophets job in Israel was to remind the King that they were not unlimited in their power—in fact they answered to God. A prime example of this can be seen in the

life of King David, who plotted to get Bathsheba for himself, and whose lies and plots lead to the loss of his child. No one is above the justice of God—not even kings.

The problem is over time systems can become warped, and people can lose sight of their call. In fact when God needed to call a prophet he did not call one from the decadent guild of prophets, instead he found a shepherd who would not only speak the truth, but also hold fast in the face of difficulty and challenge. While prophets did have some room and freedom to proclaim their message Amos' was so incendiary it was considered high treason. You could liken it to a live coal falling onto a straw mat—everything was about to burst into flames.

Amos' vision starts with what we read as a plumb line in our reading today. There is some disagreement in academic circles about the translation of this word. Some prefer to translate it as tin, or some other type of metal. In fact, the early Christian scholar Origen depicts God's word as a hammer that breaks rocks into pieces. He writes, "God will seek a material stronger than the hammer which does not feel the blows from it...Behold a man standing above an adamant wall holding his adamant. History records about adamant that it is stronger than every hammer striking it, remaining unbroken and unyielding...you can say that the holy person who is an adamant wall or who is adamant in the hands of the Lord is not affected either by the hammer or the anvil, but the more one is struck, the brighter will his virtue shine." Others as mentioned tend to translate the word as tin, that God was referring to Israel as weak and pliable and not willing to stand up for what God has called to them too. One other interpretation is that it is meant as a play on words meaning "Sigh" God will set the nation "sighing."

As mentioned the other option is the one we are most familiar with and that is with the image of the plumb line. What I appreciate about this interpretation is

that the plumb line is set against a wall that was built using a plumb line, so the measurement starts with something that is true and right. It is over time that things become warped and out of place. This also means that the measurement being used for the nation was one they were familiar with. The people of Israel knew what the Lord required of them. To help widows and orphans, to take care of the vulnerable, to treat people with honesty and dignity. Over time systems can become corrupt, power causes people to do things that are wrong, and things move away from where they are supposed to be. This what Amos must confront in his prophecy, and this is also how he comes up against the powerful Amaziah.

Amaziah as mentioned is the priest of the most important shrine in the Kingdom, and he does not like the challenge to the status quo which we can believe is profiting him quite well. He responds immediately by using the very power structure that has been serving him so well. “We do not hear of any response by the king, but Amaziah takes the bull by the horns and intervenes himself. He did not reach this position of power by being afraid to throw his weight around...he banishes Amos from the temple, telling him to make his money prophesying back in his hometown.” A dismissal if there ever was one.

What is interesting to consider is that Amaziah never references God. When there is a challenge he turns to the king, when he talks about the sanctuary at Bethel it is not God's sanctuary but the King's. Amaziah wants things to stay the same, he does not want his position to change, the system is benefitting him, and Amos' message would change that.

I often wonder if Amaziah started out this way, did he scheme his way into the position as the priest of Bethel? Or did he originally accept the call because he believed in it, then lost of sight of what he was doing over time? We will likely

never know the answer to that question. Looking at the vision of Amos and the response of Amaziah there are a few things that become clear.

Whether we interpret the image in Amos' vision as a plumb line, tin or other material like adamant, or even as a sigh what is important is that we hold true to God's call. What these images have in common is the need to hold strong even in adversity—much like Amos does. He does not run away from a difficult job.

The second is the reality that anything can become warped if we do not hold to the original call or standard. I appreciated the example one writer gave that said, "Christ is a mirror in which we can gaze on our true selves, so that we can see clearly those aspects of our lives that are out of plumb and repent of them, while seeing the true angle of dimension to which we are called." We talked about this a little during our event after church on June 2<sup>nd</sup>. I mentioned that there are churches that are called huddled churches. And that means that due to perceived limitations, a desire to keep things the same, the anxiety of not knowing how to engage with the world, among other reasons that churches can start to turn inward and lose sight of the world and their call beyond their doors. That is a fair response to situations when we don't know how to respond. However, we need to be reminded that our call from Christ was to go into the world. Another example is the disciples when Jesus died, they huddled together in a locked room, not wanting to go beyond the safety of what they knew. Jesus made a rather dramatic entrance among them and reminded them to have faith—they could not stay there.

It is good to reevaluate ourselves and our faith to make sure we are staying on track. To make sure we are awake to God's call and presence in our lives and churches, to make sure we are living our faith as God calls.