

## Living on the Level

The Sixth Sunday after Pentecost  
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July 16, 2006  
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Amos 7:7-15; Ephesians 1:3-14; Mark 6:14-29

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

It really doesn't take much for something to go off course, to get out of alignment. Say you're building a patio deck for your backyard. You've sawed and nailed all that pressure-treated wood and you've got the potential for a wonderful place to relax and entertain. But if only you had used a level. Had you placed it on the various portions of the deck frame as you were building, had you looked for the air bubble smack dab in the middle of the level, then maybe you would have realized, early on, that the angles weren't quite exact, that the platform wasn't perfectly horizontal. At this rate, when you are done building the deck, it will lean noticeably to one side, and your watermelon will roll right off the patio table. But the truth is the deck began to lean the moment it became but a fraction of an inch askew. It doesn't take much for something to go out of alignment.

Now, I was unable to borrow my father-in-law's plumb line, so my husband Randy and I decided we ourselves could make a simple plumb line for this sermon. A plumb line, like the one the prophet Amos envisions in our Old Testament lesson, is a line of cord that has a weight attached to one end. The weight is pulled to the center of the earth by gravity, and has been used for centuries in building projects because a plumb line can determine if a wall is perfectly vertical. Of course, if care has not been taken in the building of a structure, if, at the very beginning of the building process, verticality has not been maintained, and it is never corrected, you can stand next to the wall, hold up the plumb line to it, and know immediately the building is out of alignment. It doesn't take much for something to go seriously off course.

What an image we have before us in the prophecy Amos gives to Israel! The Lord God Almighty Himself standing beside a wall—or the people Israel, in this case—and declaring, plumb line in hand, that something with his people is just not right. Built up, yes, but they are far, far out of alignment with the holy purposes the Lord God had for his people. Now, when you read the rest of the book of Amos, you learn what's not right, what are the failures of Israel—the rampant social and economic injustice, the gluttony of those who **have** in contrast to the despair of those who **have not**, the willingness to blend other gods into worship, and then the self-satisfied complacency that any prosperity and national security Israel was experiencing was somehow a reflection of the people's goodness, religious zeal and obedience to God. Ha!

You know, some of those failures probably started in the smallest of ways, just a fraction askew—a decision one day to quietly withhold their resources in the face of someone else's need, a realization that they could make a quick buck by rigging the scales in their market, a temptation to pray to the false god of their neighbor, just in case. But as time goes on, the wall is now leaning so precipitously as to be completely worthless, and Amos announces its destruction. The kingdom of Israel will collapse into ruin. Amos declares this awful vision and God's judgment to the priest, Amaziah, who goes to King Jeroboam and reluctantly informs him of this news—that the plumb line shows Israel standing precariously before

God. Of course, the prophecy is not well received—the truth often hurts—and Amos is told to go back to Judah where he belongs. But Amos, with courage born of faith in the Lord God, knows he has been sent to Israel with that prophecy. He continues to speak what he knows is the truth.

Which is exactly what John the Baptist had been doing all along. Some 700-odd years later, John the Baptist stands in a similar situation, speaking the truth, having been sent by God to Israel. The Gospel of Mark opens up in chapter 1, in fact, with a brief story about John and the words he proclaimed. He calls the people to repent of their sins, seek forgiveness, and prepare for the coming of this God. He's basically saying the people of God have gone out of alignment. He's got the plumb line to prove that something just isn't right, and the people of God have neglected to **be** the people of God. By the time you get to our Gospel lesson this morning, John the Baptist has made enough of a name for himself in the painful truths he expresses that he lands in prison and is ultimately executed at King Herod's command. But how that all happens, how we get to that point, is, again, a reminder that it doesn't take much for the deck to be off-level, for the wall to lean, for people to go astray.

Mark places the story of the death of John the Baptist at the point where Herod begins to hear wonderful, scary things about a man they call Jesus. Herod hears how Jesus heals people, performs miracles, and speaks in a very familiar way: Repent! The kingdom of God has come near!

Herod's thinking, haven't I heard those words somewhere before? Ahhh, yes—John the Baptist, whom I had executed, said things like that. So Herod begins to wonder if maybe John the Baptist has been raised from the dead. Not the usual course of human events, except that even Herod had to admit that John the Baptist had spoken with authority, like a prophet of God.

Then Mark tells us about the things that led to John's beheading. It started small, really. Herod never wanted it to go quite in that direction. He was intrigued with, even impressed by John. Herod had John the Baptist imprisoned mostly because he'd made some critical comments regarding Herod's marriage to his brother's widow. (There was this law in the book of Leviticus that frowned on those kinds of things.) So Herod locked John up awhile to shut him **up** for awhile. But beheading John just wasn't on his plate, so to speak. Except that, darn it all, there was his step-daughter who danced this wonderful dance at the dinner party he was hosting, and he made a silly little promise to give her anything she wanted. And she **would** have to ask for John's head on a platter. We're talking about Herod's honor here, his reputation among his officers and court personnel, after all. Herod had to go through with his promise to his stepdaughter, else his dinner guests wouldn't respect him. So, even if it wasn't right or just, he had to execute John . . . didn't he?

See, it doesn't take much—a little dinner entertainment, a foolhardy promise, a desire to save face—and Herod, like Israel, goes completely out of alignment. See how all those little events work together, culminating in the death of an innocent man who had the courage to speak the truth.

I have been following the news reports, as many of you probably have, about the five American soldiers accused of the rape and murder of a young Iraqi woman, and the killing of the rest of her family. While the guilt or innocence of those charged is still to be determined, I've been reflecting on this reality: It doesn't take much for something to go off course, get out of alignment. Only a fraction askew at the beginning, but by the end, it's clear the wall leans precariously. What happened here? It started small. Off the level just a little bit. One of the soldiers notices the young girl when she walks by their post in her

daily tasks. Some night, when the soldiers are drinking, they start talking about her. Soon, a plot is hatched to have a little fun, take advantage of her. Do you see how the plumb line is being ignored here? These soldiers are no longer vertical. They view her as an object, not as a human being created in God's image. She's just an Iraqi. She's no one important. A few more drinks, and suddenly the soldiers think they have the right to do as they please with her. They've got guns, after all. They've got the uniform, after all. (On second thought, maybe they ought to wear civilian clothes to avoid detection.) But they still wear an attitude of arrogance by thinking their actions are acceptable. The wall's leaning more and more. Kill the family, kill the girl—they're expendable—hide the evidence, no one will know. And the one soldier who isn't accused of participating, but is charged with failing to report this attack? Well, we're talking about the code of honor, you know—comrade loyalty, you know.

Meanwhile, the plumb line shows how far off the vertical they have gone. They slaughtered a family. They tarnished and stained the image of American soldiers with innocent blood. The ethics of war ingrained in their training—that you don't target civilians, that there is right and moral conduct one is obligated and duty-bound to follow, even in war—well, those ethics have been gutted by their deed. As the trials go forth, and the truth comes out—even truth that hurts—I hope and pray that justice will be served, but also that the guilty would recognize how far off course they went, and their need to repent.

At the beginning of this worship, I led us in a time of confession, asking God for forgiveness. If you recall, our corporate words admitted how we have gone astray from the good and holy way God desires for our lives. Much like a plumb line and a carpenter's level, this confession used the image of a path, and we confessed we neglect to follow God's path. Instead, we try to forge our own path, only to discover we end up getting lost. When you think about it, it really doesn't take much diverging on our part to get off the right path.

But having confessed that painful reality, having exposed our failures, having admitted all the little ways we've lived off the level, we're now open to the merciful, transforming work of God in our own lives. He knows our walls lean precariously before him, and he wants to rebuild us and shape us into his own people. He stands ready to set us right again. Repentance and forgiveness is the place to start. Today I've announced our forgiveness through the death of an innocent man—our Lord Jesus—the very Son of God who proclaimed the truth with courage and humility, and then lived and died that truth. We the Church are called to speak that truth as well: That God our creator loves us with a perfect love, even though we're most unlovable, and that perfect love is willing to sacrifice all to draw us back to him, back into alignment with his good purposes for us. We are called to proclaim that God's plan from the beginning, from **before** the beginning, is to make us at last into his children who, having experienced his love and forgiveness, will go forth into the world to share it. **AMEN.**