Serving God’s Plumb Line

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 When I was about 12 years old, I helped my dad build a shed in the backyard of our house. My dad was a skilled draftsman, so the blueprint for a modest building like this one was not a big challenge for him. He also had experience in construction, having helped his own father build the house that I grew up in. For me, on the other hand, this project was a significant learning experience. It was a time for me to develop enough eye-hand coordination to drive nails without bending them, and it was also my first extended experience with using a level, that rectangular measuring device with a bubble floating around inside a small tube. The bubble coasts between two lines as a way of indicating if a beam was actually upright or if it tilted a little to one side or the other.

 The level played a large part in a more general lesson, one having to do with the challenges involved in going from a blueprint to an actual 3-dimensional construction. You’d think it would be an easy enough task: just do the measurements, cut the 2x4s to the desired length, nail these pieces into place, and then use the level to make sure all of the studs stand upright and all of the cross beams stay level with the foundation. But it just doesn’t work that way. Every nail hammered in is an opportunity to nudge this and that piece in unwanted directions, each cut with a circular saw misses the mark in one way or another, and anyone who has spent time in the lumber isles at Home Depot or Lowes knows that a perfectly straight 2x4 is a mythological creature. It’s a hard thing to keep the building true to the plan with all of these variables at every turn, and with each new piece introducing another opportunity for deviation.

 Today’s reading from Amos, one of the twelve minor prophets in the Hebrew Bible, begins with an image that reminds us of the challenge of sticking with a design in our conduct as well as in minor construction projects. “This is what he showed me,” Amos begins, “the Lord was standing beside a wall built with a plumb line, with a plumb line in his hand.” A plumb line isn’t exactly a level, but its function is the same. A plumb line consists of a heavy object at the end of a string, a string that is then held up to ensure that construction materials go in vertically, keeping consistent with the plan.

 The image is a helpful one for our first reading as well as for our gospel from Mark for a couple reasons. First, both stories give us prophetic utterances that function like a plumb line, sending a message that something has gone astray of the blueprint, something has gone wide of the covenant. And second, both readings have something to say about the forces and conditions that make certain characters especially prone to straying away from the plumb line, thereby making a prophetic intervention necessary, urging these characters to get back to the plan.

 In Amos, it’s the priest Amaziah who offers the clearest indication of how and when things might go awry. Amos fulfills the role of the prophet by bringing difficult truths to the Israelites, claiming that “the sanctuaries of Israel shall be laid waste” and that God “will rise against [the king], Jeroboam, with a sword.” This is unwelcome news for a priest of the temple, but it’s interesting that Amaziah doesn’t respond in a predictable way, which would be to discredit Amos’s outlandish claims altogether. Fake news! On the contrary, his response actually implies that he recognizes wisdom and perhaps justice in his difficult prophecy: he calls Amos a “seer,” and endeavors to save his life by urging him to leave Israel and go to Judah. The implication here is that Amaziah suspects the King simply will not tolerate prophecies that are not favorable to his authority.

 Practical and humane as this advice may be, it also signals a problem: Amaziah, over his years of serving as a priest in the royal temple, seems to have learned to serve Jeroboam first and God second. There are other indicators in the story that a problem lies in the way political authority has taken priority over divine authority: when he warns Amos about the peril he is in, Amaziah reminds him that “this is the king’s sanctuary, . . . a temple of the kingdom,” expressions that make it unclear whether the temple serves God’s authority or Jeroboam’s. The story points to this problem of priorities in one other way: Amaziah’s warning to Amos was actually his second act following Amos’s challenging prophecy. His first act was to notify Jeroboam that Amos had spoken against him. Amaziah, it seems, is a man of cripplingly divided allegiances. He is a temple priest who recognizes the authority of Amos’s prophecy, and he is also a servant of the King and is sensitive to the fact that his own position depends on Jeroboam’s approval. These incompatible loyalties are expressed in contradictory actions in which he winds up creating the situation that he feels compelled to fix: he informs Jeroboam of the dangerous prophecy in one verse and then tries to save Amos from the King in the next verse. The plumb line that God provides at the beginning of the story, the tool that makes sure all the parts work together according to plan, serves to highlight the way that all the parts simply don’t fit together in Amaziah character. When the desire for influence, status, and perhaps social acceptance compete with his service to God, the result is internal conflict. His is a structure not well suited to stand for long.

 A similar scenario is part of Mark’s Gospel, the story of Herod’s beheading of John the Baptist. Very much like Amos, John has made a challenging claim by pointing out Herod’s corruption of the law when he married his brother’s childless widow, and very much like Amaziah, King Herod recognizes John’s righteousness and becomes his protector. Mark even says that, though John had discomforting things to say, Herod “liked listening to him.” Despite all of these marks of appreciation, Herod, like Amaziah, is that character whose love of political power and love of status leads him to go against his own sense of justice and righteousness. In this case, the story doesn’t point to a need to please anyone with more political power than himself, but Herod nonetheless reveals himself to be subservient to all that he believes is expected of him when it comes to demonstrating his worthiness of his position: as King, Herod flaunts his power with a frivolous boast about bestowing kingdoms on his daughter to reward her dancing, and as King, he also feels the pressure to fulfill his daughter’s startling request because he perceives it as a test of his power. The voice of conscience remains present within Herod, but it is overcome by his ambition to retain the respect of others. Echoing Amaziah, Herod’s character is a structure that works against itself. He sees what the plumb line indicates, yet he cannot resist the forces pushing him to stray from an upright life, pushing him to override the covenant that aligns him with the God of justice rather than the gods of power and favor.

 These are stories where an appetite for approval, or for influence, or for status renders characters unable to honor the voice of conscience within themselves and unable to respond fully to the voices of righteousness around them. They may recognize the authority of these voices, but they also remain opposed to them in some substantial way. These are also stories that caution us about the perils of wedding religion with political ambitions. The message in Hebrew scripture is not that politics and religion should never mix. In fact, the Hebrews understood the Messiah to be that remarkable human being who could serve both religious and political ends: the Messiah would be in the line of the great King, David, and the Messiah would also restore the Temple. But until the Messiah comes, the Hebrews understood that political and religious institutions will likely be a corrosive pairing.

 It’s probably not an accident that the righteous voices in these stories are very different from the people they reach out to. These prophets seem to avoid any claim to notoriety whatsoever: Mark describes John as a man who wears clothes of camel hair and who feeds on locusts and honey. He is an outsider’s outsider. Amos, for his part, denies the title of “prophet”—even while he delivers prophecies—and opts instead to identify as a herdsman and “a dresser of sycamore trees.” In other words, he tends to figs as they ripen. The overriding message in both of these accounts is the extreme difficulty of reconciling worldly power and piety. Humility, these stories say, is the best disposition for living in accord with a blueprint, the best orientation for fulfilling the first and the greatest commandment to “Love God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind.”