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Sermon preached at St. John's Episcopal Church, West Hartford, CT

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I once lived in a beautiful old rectory in Essex, Connecticut, a house built in 1807 of brick brought over from England as ship's ballast. The house had settled considerably over the years so that there was not a level floor to be found. Put a marble just about anywhere on the pine floor boards and it would run off into a corner. We had to put shims under the tables to keep objects from falling off. Particular care had to be given to the kitchen when it was remodeled. The skirting board at the bottom of the cabinets had to be made two inches higher at one end than at the other in order to make a level surface. Eventually, eggs stayed where we put them because good carpenters knew how to use a plumb line like this one (demonstrate) to make our cabinets straight and level.

Now a plumb line is what God gives Amos in the first reading today. God gives Amos a moral and spiritual reference point to measure the nation of Israel. And when Amos measures Israel against the plumb line of God's standard of righteousness, Amos sees that there is much that is out of kilter in the nation's life. Amos gives up being a dresser of sycamore trees and takes up a new calling as a prophet.

On the surface, things appeared to be going well in Israel. The economy was booming and Israel was at peace with her neighbors. A rich merchant class had grown along with the nation's prosperity. The religious shrines at Bethel and Gilgal were crowded with people giving thanks for their success, and the priests at the shrines benefitted from the people's offerings.

But when Amos measured the nation's wealth against God's plumb line, Amos saw what was amiss and began to speak out. Amos denounced overfed plutocrats lolling on beds of ivory in their palaces while peasants were burdened with debt and sold into slavery for the price of a pair of shoes. Amos spoke out against small farmers being dispossessed to make room for large estates and against judges who could be bribed into unjust decisions. Beneath the surface of Israel's prosperity and peace, Amos saw a people divided, a people who had forgotten how to care for each other, a people who worshiped affluence rather than God.

Amos's work as a dresser of sycamore trees was not coincidental. The biblical sycamore is like a fig tree, and its fruit has to be cut to make it ripen. So Amos went from tree to tree, cutting each fruit open so air could get in and speed up the ripening and make the fruit juicy. He sliced the fruits open to expose any insects nesting inside and let them out. Now Amos found himself dressing Israel, cutting her open to make the nation healthy and fruitful and to expose the decay within.

Now prophets like Amos don't usually receive a warm welcome. People don't like to be denounced for their wrongdoing and resent as troublemakers those who shine a spotlight on their sins. People who live in big houses get uncomfortable when asked why they need so much space. Most people want prophets to go away, and so it was with Amos. "Get out of here," cries Amaziah in today's reading. We don't want you here in Israel. We don't want to hear your prophecies of doom and destruction, especially not here in Bethel, the royal shrine. This is the king's sanctuary and a temple of the kingdom. Go somewhere else far away.

Actually, Amos got off easy. Often prophets are not only denounced, they are killed. John the Baptist ended up with his head on a platter. And fifty years ago Martin Luther King was slain by an assassin's bullets. Perilous though the vocation may be, prophets play a vital role in human society. Prophets are able to detach themselves from the values and norms of the status quo and call us to a higher standard and wider vision of what might be. Prophets remind us of what we are supposed to be like as the people of God.

Prophets are not just in the Bible or in ancient times. We too are called to be prophets, to be in the world but not of the world, in all the concerns of the day, but always aware of who God is and what God expects of us. And when we see what is happening around us from a Godly point of view, we will sometimes have to be outspoken and critical, whether that is in our families, in our place of work, in our community, in our church, or in our nation. Such a prophet was Thomas Jefferson when he said, "I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just."

One reason why it is so important for us to gather in this place for weekly worship is to encounter God's plumb line together as we deepen our understanding of who God is and what kind of people God calls us to be. We read and consider together the Word of God in Holy Scripture. We offer our prayers and intercessions and hymns of praise. We confess where we have gone astray from God's paths and ask for forgiveness. We give thanks for all the ways God has made Godself known to us, but especially for God's taking flesh and coming to us in Jesus. We remember the love that Jesus shared with everyone he met and the love that he died to show to all the world, and we celebrate Jesus' promise to be with us always. Then we go out into the world to be the people of God, people whose values and perspectives have been formed by the God we have come to know. God becomes the plumb line by which we view ourselves and by which we view our world.

A prominent news item this past week has been the story of the twelve boys from Thailand and their coach who were rescued from the cave in which they were trapped for over two weeks by suddenly rising flood waters. Around our country and around the world, people saw the pictures of the boys huddled inside the dark cave and prayed for their deliverance and prayed for the rescue workers who were trying to get them out. At times it seemed like an impossible project. The oxygen in the cave reached a critically low level. Then the happy news came that four boys had been rescued, then another four, and finally all twelve boys and their coach, guided through the flooded labyrinth by a valiant team of Navy SEAL divers. The world now rejoiced to see pictures of the boys safe in their hospital beds smiling and holding up their fingers in a sign of victory.

Why did people care so much about this handful of children? What united us in hoping and praying for their deliverance? What motivated so many people to risk their lives – and one brave diver to lose his life – to make that deliverance possible? Could it be the plumb line, the plumb line of God’s righteousness, the plumb line God showed to Amos and the other prophets, the plumb line of God’s love made flesh in Jesus, a plumb line that God has planted deep within every one of us?

Why care about some children stuck in a cave on the other side of the world? Why should people risk their lives to save them? Why rejoice when the rescue is accomplished and the children are alive and reunited with their parents? Why? Because as those made in God’s image we know that we are all members of the same human family, connected to one another and all creation, that we have been given hearts that are made to have compassion for those who are in need, and that we are meant to work together even at personal risk for the good of all. What a gift God has given us in such a plumb line! If we would let it be our guide, it will make our lives and our country and our world straight and true.