



Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church  
Asheville, North Carolina  
11 July 2021  
Sermon: Measure for Measure  
Rev. Dr. Richard Coble

Amos 7:7-15

### **Amos 7:7-15      New Revised Standard Version**

<sup>7</sup> This is what he showed me: the Lord was standing beside a wall built with a plumb line, with a plumb line in his hand. <sup>8</sup> And the Lord said to me, “Amos, what do you see?” And I said, “A plumb line.” Then the Lord said,

“See, I am setting a plumb line  
in the midst of my people Israel;  
I will never again pass them by;  
<sup>9</sup> the high places of Isaac shall be made desolate,  
and the sanctuaries of Israel shall be laid waste,  
and I will rise against the house of Jeroboam with the sword.”

<sup>10</sup> Then Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, sent to King Jeroboam of Israel, saying, “Amos has conspired against you in the very center of the house of Israel; the land is not able to bear all his words. <sup>11</sup> For thus Amos has said,

‘Jeroboam shall die by the sword,  
and Israel must go into exile  
away from his land.’”

<sup>12</sup> And Amaziah said to Amos, “O seer, go, flee away to the land of Judah, earn your bread there, and prophesy there; <sup>13</sup> but never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king’s sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom.”

<sup>14</sup> Then Amos answered Amaziah, “I am no prophet, nor a prophet’s son; but I am a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees, <sup>15</sup> and the Lord took me from following the flock, and the Lord said to me, ‘Go, prophesy to my people Israel.’”

In the life of trees, there is no individual. We may think of a tree as a solitary figure, standing alone in a field, independent, set apart, but that is an illusion. Trees

are communal, joined not just by roots and branches, but also by fungi and other subterranean organisms that connect them across great distances. And they socialize with one another. Nathaniel Rich, writing for *The Atlantic*, gives these examples, “After [pests] attack a sugar maple, it emits insecticides that warn its [tree] neighbors, which respond by intensifying their own defenses. When the roots of two Douglas firs meet underground, they fuse, joining vascular systems; if one tree gets ill, the other cares for it. The chopping down of a tree causes those surrounding it to weaken, as if in mourning.”<sup>1</sup> Trees are also intergenerational, and not just within their own species. I see this often in hikes through our mountains. A felled tree’s decay becomes the nourishment of new life, samplings sprout up from and dig their roots into the body of a passing tree, new life springing forth from old.

Richard Powers, in his epic environmental novel *The Overstory*, captures this well in one of the book’s final scenes. Nick Hoel is one of nine main characters in a book that spans multiple generations of several families across centuries. He suffers exorbitant loss throughout his life. In the opening pages, Nick loses his family on Christmas morning to a freak accident of carbon monoxide poisoning, and he carries this grief throughout the novel. Along the way, in the

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<sup>1</sup> Nathaniel Rich, “The Novel that Asks, ‘What Went Wrong with Mankind?’” *The Atlantic*, June 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2018/06/richard-powers-the-overstory/559106/>

midst of tragedy, like all the characters of *The Overstory*, Nick finds solace through his relationship with trees, at times becoming an artist cataloging their growth and structure; at other times an activist trying to save them from corporate greed. Many of his conservation efforts fail; he sees centuries old redwood forests cut down in the name of progress.

In one of the poignant, final scenes of the book, Nick is an itinerant artist and eco-radical. Having weathered his losses and failures, his story ends as he assembles a massive sculpture of downed tree trunks in the shape of a word. The trunks are so big, the letters can be seen by passing space satellites. Together, they spell the word STILL.<sup>2</sup> As the decades pass, trees sprout from these decayed trunks. From above, a forest of trees continues to spell out the word: STILL. As in, *still*, life carries on; *still*, life builds upon and supports itself. *Still*, trees grow; they connect; they support and nourish succeeding generations. The bountiful, intricate growth, structure, and shade of trees are omnipresent around us here in Asheville, yet so often go unnoticed. When we pay attention, they remind us that life is more about connection than distance or hierarchy; more about generativity and care than competition.

What keeps you anchored? What grounds you to our fundamental connection with one another, and with this earth?

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<sup>2</sup> Richard Powers, *The Overstory* (New York: WW Norton, 2018), 501-502.

For the prophet Amos, it was a plumb line: “This is what God showed me,” says the prophet, “the Lord was standing beside a wall built with a plumb line, with a plumb line in God’s hand. And the Lord said to me, ‘Amos, what do you see?’ And I said, ‘A plumb line.’ Then the Lord said, ‘See, I am setting a plumb line, in the midst of my people Israel; I will never again pass them by.’” For those not steeped in pre-modern construction tools and techniques, a plumb line is simply a weight on a string. When it stands still it produces a straight vertical line that you can use to measure, level, or find the center of gravity. Amos’s plumb line is the third of four prophetic visions from God at the end of the book. Here, the “wall built with a plumb line” is the nation of Israel, and the plumb line used to measure it is the law of God, the law of righteousness and justice. The Lord is using this measuring tool to show that the wall had become warped.

Amos lived in the time of King Jeroboam II, a time of relative peace and prosperity for Israel, when larger competing powers around it were momentarily weakened or distracted. It was a time when you could finally catch your breath. You might know this feeling. It’s like when your friends and neighbors and family finally get the vaccine that gives you some relative safety from a 17-month-long pandemic; it’s like when the stock market reaches record levels and your 401K looks better than it ever did; or, it’s like when your home property value skyrockets

in a seller's market. Yes, things were looking up in Israel in the time of Amos; people were even starting to go to church more.

And yet, the plumb line revealed that things were - off; the wall had become askew. Because, like today, prosperity among the privileged widened class divisions into a chasm – the moment of rest, of catching your breath, was reserved for only a few. Those who have it easy, says the prophet, are also those who “oppress the poor [and] crush the needy” (chapter 4, verse 1). They “turn justice to wormwood, and bring righteousness to the ground!” (5:7). “They abhor the one who speaks the truth...[and] trample on the poor” (5:10-11). “Alas for those who lie on beds of ivory, and lounge on their couches, and eat lambs from the flock and calves from the stall, who sing idle songs to the sound of the harp” (6:4-5). And then these famous words of God:

I hate, I despise your festivals,  
and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.  
Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings,  
I will not accept them;  
and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals  
I will not look upon.  
Take away from me the noise of your songs;  
I will not listen to the melody of your harps.  
But let justice roll down like waters,  
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream (5:21-24).

God told Amos to take a plumb line, and Amos found the wall askew. Found the wall askew, like, when people who grew up in your town find they can no longer afford to live there, because the medium listing price for a house is \$330K, and

rent climbs faster than wages, and gentrifying neighborhoods push and tax people out of their homes. Found the wall askew, like, when a nation's industry cuts down 97% of the trees in this country and our children find their parents' generation never really considered, much less agreed upon a viable climate plan. Found the wall askew, like when state legislatures trample on the right to vote with our highest court's blessing and communities pushed to the margins find themselves disproportionately targeted. Found askew, found askew, found askew. We could go on.

“The Lord was standing beside a wall built with a plumb line, with a plumb line in God's hand. And the Lord said to me, ‘Amos, what do you see?’” The parallels between the days of Amos and our own context are striking. We are separating ourselves, isolating ourselves. We are erecting barriers between one another for profit, for power, in the name of hierarchy and competition. We are plundering our communities and the very earth we live on.

In a time of separation, of oppression, of complicity, what keeps you anchored? What grounds you to our fundamental connection with one another, and with this earth?

Like the trees that surround us, like the prophet's plumb line, we too are called back to our fundamental connection, called back time and again, by those who represent the body of Christ for us. Who represents the body of Christ for

you?<sup>3</sup> Later today, we will honor the life and witness to the resurrection of Betsy Rhodes, a life-long member of this church and of the Asheville community. In her last years, Betsy served as a deacon of this church, though her service spans countless other leadership roles in the life of Grace Covenant, in Asheville City Schools and beyond. As deacon, I can attest that Betsy sent out more cards, made more calls, and offered more visits than I could count. Before I thought of another undertaking for the whole deacon board, like, for instance, sending prayer cards out over the summer, Betsy had already done it for her deacon group. She helped knit our community together; her life; her faith; her spirit grounded us in our fundamental connection to one another and to our creator.

The weekend before, on Saturday, we honored the life and celebrated the witness to the resurrection of Elizabeth ‘Liz’ Rupp, another pillar of our community. Another member dedicated to service and love and connection, who was a voice and a witness for unbounded love, inclusion, and partnership with our LGBTQIA siblings in faith long before it was fashionable in our denomination. Her life was and her spirit is a constant reminder, her love and service and bravery call us back to the Spirit who connects us all.

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<sup>3</sup> I originally found this comparison between Amos’s plumb line and the exemplary lives of people in Christian community in Steven Edmondson, “Theological Perspective: Amos 7:7-15” in *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Vol. 3*, edited by David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 218-222.

On Thursday night of this week, right before vespers, right under the shade of the giant maple tree that watches over our memorial garden, Marcia, John Shoop, and I sat out on one of the picnic tables on the church lawn, and we tried to name all the GCPC members we have lost in the time of the pandemic, since March of 2020. We spoke of Hettie Lou Garland's wisdom; we remembered Bob Busey's stories; we recounted Harry Summerlin's kindness and care; Ida Edge and Bob Walther's humor and laughter – each unique in their own way; Cory Hartbarger's strength. We remembered many more GCPC members and friends, whom we have lost, whom I could name. The pandemic has been a season of loss. Together we grieve for so many in our community. We carry this loss; I feel it, like a weight in the middle of my chest. Today is difficult day.

And yet, not in spite of the grief but alongside it, we know, that like the trees towering over our heads, like the words of scripture calling us back, these stalwart members of our community are now a part of the great cloud of witnesses, witnesses to God's unending love that follows us in life and in death, witnesses to our fundamental connection, a connection that will not break, no matter how hard we try to break it. As we pull apart, as our systems pull us apart, *they* call us back. Their memory and their legacy and their spirit, call us back. Who is it that calls you back? When you are ready to let go, when you are tempted to give up, when you find yourself complicit or apathetic, when you feel crushed by the weight of



systems and centuries of sin, what calls you back, who calls you to keep moving forward?

*Still. Still. Still.* Still the wind moves through the trees. Still the prophets of Scripture call us out and call us in. Still the saints surround us, in memory and spirit - as we grieve their loss; as we honor their legacy; as we keep on working and worshipping, laughing and crying, remembering and learning, caring, and liberating, and speaking truth together. And for that, we give thanks; we give thanks to God. Amen.