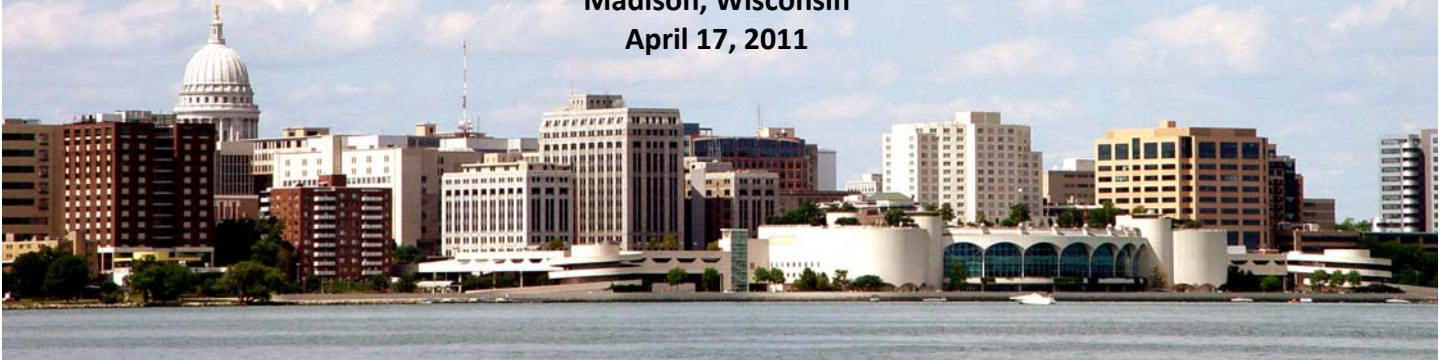


“That’s One, That’s Two, That’s Three”

AMOS 1:1-9

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Last Sunday evening in Merrill, Wisconsin, Don Smith was getting ready for bed when he heard what he thought was a train horn. Suddenly, he saw a giant pine tree crash through his bedroom window, he covered his head to protect himself from the flying glass, and the next thing he remembers is waking up in the hospital. As most of you know, neighbors found this 67-year old man on top of a tree 200 feet from the rubble of what used to be his home. He is now in the hospital recovering from several broken ribs, a ruptured spleen and a bruised lung. The horn he heard, of course, was not for a train, but for a tornado.

With this in mind, I would like for us to consider this morning the danger of ignoring a warning. Only this time we are talking not about a tornado warning, but we are talking about a series of warnings from God as they are found in the Old Testament book of Amos. And as we talk about warnings, I know the temptation is to think about a warning as being something rather negative, and yet that is not really the case. After all, when that warning sounded up in Merrill last Sunday evening, we would hardly describe the siren as being bad; but rather, we would describe it as being positive. When something bad is about to happen, if it is something we can prepare for, then it is good to know about it. It is good to know when something dangerous is about to happen.

As we discussed last week, God’s kingdom in the Old Testament was united under Saul, David, and Solomon, but at the death of Solomon, the kingdom divided over (of all things) taxes. Now, I’m doing the best I can to not get too political here, but Rehoboam, Solomon’s son, decided to solve a fiscal crisis by raising taxes. Well, Jeroboam didn’t like that idea, so he took a group away, with ten of the tribes going to the north with Jeroboam, and two of the tribes staying to the south with Rehoboam. Last week, we looked at King Uzziah in the Southern Kingdom, and we discussed the fact that the Southern Kingdom had its ups and downs, but that the northern Ten Tribes had a bad start and only got worse from there. You might remember that when Jeroboam split away with the Ten Northern Tribes, he immediately set up his own places of worship in the north, so that his people would no longer need to travel south to Jerusalem to worship. He set up pagan idols and altars in the north as a matter of convenience, to appeal to the people, and so the people left God almost from the very beginning. Over time, the rich got richer, and the poor were being ignored. The nation was prosperous, but there were some serious issues.

However, because of His great love and patience, God did not give up on the Northern Ten Tribes immediately, but He sent them warnings through the prophets. But what is really unusual about Amos is that Amos was not from the Northern Tribes, he was from the Southern Tribes. There was great animosity between the north and the south, but for some reason, God called on this southern, backwoods tree farmer and shepherd to go up to the big cities of the north to give a series of warnings, and it was a rather bizarre contrast. I would picture it a little bit like Crocodile Dundee going to the City of New York. Do some of you remember that movie from the mid 80's? That guy was just out of place ("You call that a knife? This is a knife!"), and that's how I picture Amos in the Northern Ten Tribes.

But Amos had a serious message. For a sample of what Amos had to say, consider Amos 5:21-24, a passage that was made famous in our own land by Martin Luther King Jr. In Amos 5:21-24, God said,

***I hate, I reject your festivals,
Nor do I delight in your solemn assemblies.
Even though you offer up to Me burnt offerings and your grain offerings,
I will not accept them;
And I will not even look at the peace offerings of your fattened animals. [ESV]
Take away from Me the noise of your songs;
I will not even listen to the sound of your harps.
But let justice roll down like waters
And righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.***

In other words, God was not interested in any more superficial man-made religion, but He was looking for justice and righteousness. He was looking for true repentance among the Northern Ten Tribes. And so the Lord sent them warnings, He sent them prophets, and He called out to them as a Father would call out to His children. He sent a series of warnings through the prophet Amos. And in the first half of Amos 7, we find that God sent a series of visions. In fact, I might compare this to how some of us as parents have a way of counting to three. And I think you know what I'm talking about. We established very early on in our family that for behavior that was not life-threatening or outright rebellious, we would start counting to three. They knew that three was really, really bad. So normally, we would just hold up a finger, and they would know that the process had started. And normally that would just take care of it. Sometimes we would need to get to two, and on very rare occasions we would make it to three, and then the punishment had to happen. It had to happen to be consistent, because if we just got to three and kept on threatening, that kind of takes the danger out of Number 1 next time! And we try not to yell or get too excited about any of this, because the goal was to teach and the motivation was love. But the basic idea was that there was a sense of progression, a warning that came in stages, and a warning that was based on behavior.

This morning, then, we look at the first nine verses of Amos 7 (p. 1442). The year is roughly 760 BC, roughly 40 years before the Northern Ten Tribes would be completely destroyed and taken away by the Assyrians, and roughly the same time frame from our lesson last week concerning King Uzziah in the south. This time, though, we are in the north as a southern prophet delivers a powerful message, a series of three visions.

I. Let us please start by looking at the first vision as it is recorded for us in verses 1-3, A VISION OF A GREAT PLAGUE OF LOCUSTS.

Please look with me at Amos 7:1-3,

¹ Thus the Lord GOD showed me, and behold, He was forming a locust-swarm when the spring crop began to sprout. And behold, the spring crop was after the king's mowing. ² And it came about, when it had finished eating the vegetation of the land, that I said, "Lord GOD, please pardon! How can Jacob stand, for he is small?" ³ The LORD changed His mind about this. "It shall not be," said the LORD.

Again, here we have a vision of judgment that the Lord is preparing for His people. The door cracks open a little bit, and Amos is able to see what's coming, and he sees a huge swarm of locusts. And yet not only do we have the devastation of the locusts, but they come at the worst possible time. My understanding is that the king would demand the first mowing of the crop, and only after that would the people be allowed to plant a second crop of grain for themselves. But we find here that the locusts come right after the **"king's mowing,"** as the spring crop was just beginning to sprout. In other words, this was the absolute farthest time from the previous harvest. Last year's grain was running out. The people were perhaps just starting to get hungry, and the locusts come in and destroy everything. And yet as we learned in our lesson last week, all of these things had been predicted by the Lord. Way back in Deuteronomy 28:38, God had warned the people, if you are faithful, I will bless you beyond measure, but if you turn away from Me, **"You shall bring out much seed to the field but you will gather in little, for the locust will consume it."** And so here we are hundreds of years later, and that punishment is about to become a reality.

However, as Amos sees the vision, it is too much to bear. Remember: He's a farmer! And so he says to the Lord, **"Lord God, please pardon! How can Jacob stand, for he is small?"** I should point out here that Amos knew right away that the locusts were a punishment for sin, and that this is no random event, because he asks the Lord to forgive. The people of Israel, of course, would have been too stubborn to see any kind of connection between the two, but Amos sees it, and he steps in and asks God to reconsider. So, we have Amos, a farmer and shepherd from the south, stepping in on behalf of the tribes in the north. Again, there was hostility between the two kingdoms, but Amos stepped in.

And in response to his prayer, we find that God holds back. Not that the people were really forgiven, not that everything was okay with God, but it means that God gave them an extension, He put the punishment off for a while, He gave them more time. So we have a warning from God to the people through a prophet, but somehow it's not really negative, is it? But instead, we find that God listens, and God holds back.

II. So, let's move on to the second vision in Amos 7, we move on to THE VISION OF FIRE.

It is interesting that even after holding back on the locusts, God now moves on to something else, as if to confirm the previous vision. I am thinking of the situation with Pharaoh's dreams in the book of Genesis. Not only did he dream about the seven skinny cows and the seven fat cows, but he also dreamed about the seven ears of grain that were good and the seven ears of grain that were thin. The two dreams were different, but the message was the same. In the same way, God continues with a second message for Amos in Amos 7:4-6,

⁴ Thus the Lord GOD showed me, and behold, the Lord GOD was calling to contend with them by fire, and it consumed the great deep and began to consume the farm land. ⁵ Then I said, "Lord GOD, please stop! How can Jacob stand, for he is small?" ⁶ The LORD changed His mind about this. "This too shall not be," said the Lord GOD.

And so we have the picture of a terrible fire (it escalates from locusts to fire), but this is not just any fire, it is a fire that will consume the great deep and the farm land. I assume the **"great deep"** is perhaps a reference to

the Mediterranean Sea, and so it is a fire so intense that it will evaporate huge bodies of water. Everything gets wiped out. It is similar, in some ways, to the fire that we have seen out in Texas over the past week or so, a great wildfire that destroys nearly everything in its path.

And with that, Amos steps in a second time and says, ***“Lord God, please stop! How can Jacob stand, for he is small?”*** So, he does not ask God to forgive as he did the first time. He knows that the Northern Ten Tribes have done nothing to *make* God reconsider, they do not *deserve* forgiveness, and so he makes a plea based purely on God’s mercy, ***“Lord God, please stop!”*** And once again, the Lord holds back, ***“This too shall not be,”*** evidence that God listens to prayer.

But even though God holds back, we still have the warning; we still have this vision of judgment that has been held off until some point in the future for the people of the Northern Kingdom.

III. And with that, we get to Vision #3 as Amos sees GOD HOLDING A PLUMB LINE AMONG THE PEOPLE.

And with this final vision, there is no arguing, there is no pleading for mercy, because the warning is incredibly clear and there is no arguing with the illustration. If you will, please look with me at verses 7-9,

⁷ Thus He showed me, and behold, the Lord was standing by a vertical wall with a plumb line in His hand. ⁸ The LORD said to me, "What do you see, Amos?" And I said, "A plumb line." Then the Lord said, "Behold I am about to put a plumb line in the midst of My people Israel. I will spare them no longer. ⁹ "The high places of Isaac will be desolated and the sanctuaries of Israel laid waste. Then I will rise up against the house of Jeroboam with the sword."

As most of us know, a plumb line is simply a string or cord with a weight on the end, and it is used to demonstrate whether something is straight. I have had my own plumb line since I was a little boy; in fact, it was one of the first tools in my tool box. I have replaced the cord many times, and it probably needs it again. The last time I used it was a year ago when we went down to Tennessee to help my brother-in-law build a fence. I put the corner posts in, I strung a line between those posts, I then measured 8-foot increments from the corner, and every 8 feet I would hold up this line, and wherever the plumb bob landed, that’s where we dug a hole. His yard was hilly and sloped in all different directions, but we knew that whatever we did, this line was straight. This line was perpendicular to the earth.

The plumb line, in fact, is one of the oldest tools known to man. It was used in ancient times when building a stone wall to measure whether the wall was straight, and whether there were any bulges in the wall. After all, if you were building a wall and it got just a little bit off with every course of bricks or stones, the result could be catastrophic. So, after giving in to the prophet’s prayers after the first and second visions, we now have God stepping in for a third time and saying: That’s it! The time has now come to apply the building code. And if the project does not measure up to the plumb line, the building must be torn down. In effect, the great Umpire is now calling “Strike Three,” and there is no arguing with the Umpire’s call, because the plumb line has now been placed among God’s people.

God says: Here is perfection...and here are you! And to Amos, the contrast is striking. He doesn’t argue this time. Earlier, perhaps he thought that God wasn’t quite being fair, “Oh Lord, please don’t do that,” but now, the prophet is silent, he no longer steps in to defend the people of Israel. They are clearly guilty. God does not compare them to surrounding nations. He does not grade on a curve. He is not impressed by their big cities. He is not swayed by their wealth. He is not impressed by their political power. He is not impressed by

how religious they seemed to be on the outside. But God went right in and held up that plumb line, and the situation became obvious immediately: There was a difference between God's word and what these people were doing!

God's word, therefore, is the plumb line! And that's a lesson that carries over today, nearly 2,800 years later. God doesn't care how good we might be compared to our neighbor. It doesn't matter whether my life is straighter than yours or your life is straighter than mine. It doesn't matter how good we are at explaining away a certain passage. It doesn't matter what kind of mental gymnastics we may be able to go through to try to avoid the power of God's word, because all that really matters is the plumb line. The plumb line is not affected by emotions, excuses, or explanations. It is one of the world's most simple tools. Either the wall is straight or it isn't. And in the same way, in the end, we will be compared to the perfect standard, the word of God.

Conclusion:

Lord willing, next week I'd like for us to consider the local priest's reaction to what Amos had to say. We find his reaction in the rest of Amos 7. But for this morning, the reality for us is that the plumb line is still around. We have the word of God, and God's word has the power to point out sin in our lives. The word of God serves as a warning, and as we have discovered this morning, a warning is not necessarily bad. But a warning can be a very good thing. Like the siren that sounded last Sunday evening up in Merrill, God's word says, "Hey, there's a problem here!" And if there's a problem, we not only need to know about it, we need to do something about it. To ignore the warning would be like going to bed as the siren is going off and as a tornado is bearing down on the house.

Like James said in James 1, we must ***"...in humility receive the word implanted, which is able to save your souls. But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves."*** But if we look intently at the perfect law, the law of liberty, and if we abide by it, God tells us that we will be blessed in what we do. The word of God is an amazing gift. And when we find that we do not measure up, the Bible teaches that we can go to the one who is holding the plumb line, and He has the power to make things right. He sent His only Son to die in our place. We respond to that sacrifice by turning away from sin and by allowing ourselves to be buried with Him in baptism for the forgiveness of our past sins. If you would like to talk about it, let us know. If you would like for us to pray about some situation in your life right now, we would invite you to write your concern down, bring it to the front, and we will be glad to go to God on your behalf. But if you are ready to obey the gospel right now, you can let us know as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

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