

THE TRUTH STANDARD

Carl Wilton

Lamington Presbyterian Church

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Amos 7:7-17; John 14:1-11

***“Then the Lord said, ‘See, I am setting a plumb line
in the midst of my people Israel...’”***

Amos 7:8b

If you were to open up a carpenter's toolbox, you'd find all manner of tools inside: some old, some new. One of them is a little device I was introduced to just the other day.

My nephew Cory was helping us out, installing a wall-mounted flat-screen TV at the manse. Anyone who knows me knows I'm not the most handy of people when it comes to home repair. But I have great appreciation for people like my nephew, who know just what to do.

“I'll go to Home Depot and get what we need,” says he.

“Sounds fine to me,” says I. (“Better you than me,” was what I was thinking.)

“Uncle Carl, do you have a stud finder?” he asked.

For the record, I did know what a stud finder is. I just didn't happen to have one.

Bottom line: the TV's now successfully mounted on the wall — and I'm the

proud owner of an electronic stud finder. It's a little box you slide across the wall that lights up whenever — through its own dark magic — it locates a wooden stud behind the sheetrock.

I remember my dad, years ago, showing me how to locate a stud by tapping gently on the wall with a hammer until you find the spot where it sounds not so hollow. It was not the most reliable of methods. The electronic version is a big improvement!

There's another tool you just might find in a carpenter's toolbox — and it happens to be one of the oldest tools in human history. This tool the Egyptians used, to build the pyramids. Who knows? — maybe the ancient Britons used it, too, as they raised the monoliths of Stonehenge. The tool I'm speaking of is so ancient, it's even mentioned in the Hebrew Scripture.... in today's reading from the prophet Amos.

It's a wondrously simple device: a length of string, with a lead weight tied to one end. The tool's called a "plumb line" — from the Latin "plumbum," or "lead."

Masons hang a plumb line next to a wall they're building. The tug of gravity pulls the weight (and the string) straight down. By sighting along the string, workers know whether the wall is straight, or whether it isn't — whether it's

perpendicular to the ground, or whether it's leaning over. If the wall's "out of plumb" — leaning to one side, even the slightest bit — it won't stand for long. The only solution, for a wall that's out of plumb, is to tear it down and start all over again.

Sometimes, in the construction business, there are corners you can cut. There are certain mistakes you can cover up, with an extra piece of plywood or a coat of paint. But one thing you can't cover up. You can't compensate for a wall that's out of plumb. Many people, throughout human history, have wished for an exception to the law of gravity, but no one's ever been granted that request. (Just ask that woman who climbed the Statue of Liberty on the Fourth of July. She knows).

What the plumb line does, pure and simple, is to graphically display the force of gravity. Once the builders see exactly which direction gravity is pulling, they build their wall accordingly.

The prophet Amos uses the plumb line as a sort of sermon illustration. Now, let me tell you something about old Amos. He isn't exactly your warm-fuzzy, positive-thinking type of preacher. Amos is a prophet. He got into the prophecy trade because he was convinced his country was going to the dogs, and somebody

had to stand up and say something.

Nobody, back then, would have rolled out the Chamber-of-Commerce welcome-mat when Amos showed up in the neighborhood. First of all, to the people of the northern kingdom, he's a foreigner; Amos hails from the southern kingdom of Judah. Second, Amos isn't much of a diplomat. He doesn't mince words. No, he calls 'em like he sees 'em:

**Then the Lord said to me:
“The end has come upon my people Israel;
I will never again pass them by.
The songs of the temple shall become wailings in that day,”
says the Lord God;
“the dead bodies shall be many,
Cast out in every place.”**

Now isn't that a cheery thought! Hymn-singing transformed into wails of lament; and corpses scattered all over town. No, this isn't some zombie-apocalypse disaster movie. It's the prophet's vision of what will happen to his country, if the people don't repent from their evil ways.

Amos is more than upset. He's mad... furious.... incensed. He thinks it's scandalous that the poverty-stricken peasants can be sold into virtual slavery for the price of a pair of shoes, while the rich recline on fancy couches and gorge themselves with gourmet delicacies.

More than that, Amos castigates the business community for shady dealings.

He's a one-man Federal Trade Commission. He insists that all the stall-owners down in the marketplace adopt standard weights and measures, and stop bilking the common folk.

Wherever Amos goes, it seems, a little funnel-cloud of controversy follows. He's right in the midst of his typical commotion, when he introduces his image of the plumb-line.

Amos has a vision. In the vision, he sees the Lord: standing next to a wall under construction...

**“See, I am setting a plumb line in the midst of my people Israel,”
says the Lord,
“I will never again pass them by;
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.”**

King Jeroboam — ruler of the northern kingdom — surely does not feel flattered to be mentioned in Amos' prophecy. It's not the sort of publicity that helps his cause. Amos is likening the king's entire house — his dynasty — to a building whose walls are out of plumb. The only thing to do with shabby construction like that, as everyone knows, is to pull the building down; and that, Amos says, is exactly what God is proposing to do with Israel.

History will prove Amos right. A few years later, the Assyrian army will

sweep through the northern kingdom like a knife through butter. The nation will be utterly annihilated, as an independent state. When that disaster breaks upon the people, some will consider it a sad quirk of politics. Yet most Israelites, paying attention to Amos at last, will see the Assyrian invasion as nothing less than the judgment of God — a harsh, but well-deserved sentence, levied on a nation grown corrupt and soft, a nation that has long been teetering on a shoddy spiritual foundation.

There are some who think America's in a similar state. There are some who claim we've lost our spiritual moorings, that our culture has discarded all moral absolutes. Some research studies indicate those folks could be right....

A number of years back, for example, a team of researchers polled 5,000 Americans. They found the following:

- ...93% said their judgment about right and wrong was based solely on personal belief.**
- ...74% said they would steal from those they thought wouldn't miss it.**
- ...Almost 50% of college students admitted that they cheat.**
- ...Upwards of 24% of all resumés contain materially false information.**
- ...64% of people said they would lie when it suits them, if it caused no "real" damage.**

Those statistics come from the 1990s. I really don't think things have gotten better — do you?

The truth, it seems, is becoming an endangered species in our culture. Nowhere has this been more the case, historically, than in politics — but for decades now we've been seeing a blatant and unapologetic style of political lying, that goes beyond the elastic campaign promises of the past.

You see it most clearly in the phrase, “fake news.” The phrase was invented in the era of social media: when political operatives realized they could create whole news agencies to churn out completely made-up articles. Unlike the era of “yellow journalism” of the late 19th century — when the likes of William Randolph Hearst at least had to sell newspapers for a penny or two — today's fake news stories are circulated for free, by legions of eager acolytes.

The comedian Stephen Colbert coined a word to describe this phenomenon. The American Dialect Society named it its 2005 word of the year. The word is “truthiness.” Something that demonstrates the characteristic of truthiness doesn't actually have to be true. It just needs to sound that way.

You can just imagine old Amos the prophet holding his plumb line up against American culture. Oh, what cockeyed, precariously-leaning structures we create, when we lost track of the objective standard of truth!

I was a Philosophy major in college, and I remember seriously studying the

question, “What is truth?” I recall that there were two competing theories.

One was known as the correspondence theory of truth. According to that theory, in order for something to be true, it had to correspond to some existing, external standard, usually called a “fact.” Absolute truth does exist in the universe, and in order for some smaller idea to be true, it must correspond to that ideal.

When the metric system was being developed in France in the late 1700s, the creators of the meter — the fundamental unit of measure — had to come up with a standard against which all other measuring-sticks could be calibrated. They actually created a meter-stick made of platinum, meticulously machined to the tiniest fraction of a millimeter. All other meter-sticks were meant to be manufactured to exacting standards that matched the original as closely as possible.

Eventually, scientists found even more precise ways to calculate the exact length of one meter — such as measurements of the circumference of the earth, or the decay of certain chemical elements. For there to be honest weights and measures, there had to be precise, external standards such as these.

So, that’s the correspondence theory of truth. I also remember learning about a competing theory of truth, known as the coherence theory.

In the coherence theory of truth, you don’t need an absolute standard. What’s most important is that all your ideas make sense with respect to one

another. You can create an entire system of belief, and the standard by which it's judged to be true is whether or not it makes sense internally.

There are examples of internally coherent truth-systems out there that have little in the way of moorings to reality. One example — and a rather old one — is the Flat-Earth Society. Members of the Flat-Earth Society try to convince other people that the world is not round, but flat. They have elaborate arguments and proofs that, they claim, demonstrate this is so. Their arguments have no connection to actual reality, but their system of thought is elegantly coherent.

There are certain political extremist groups that function in much the same way — such as the Naziism of Adolf Hitler. Naziism, as you know, was built on a virulent anti-Semitism. The Nazis promulgated blatant lies about Jewish people. One of the most hateful of these was the belief that Jewish people kidnaped, murdered and ate Christian children. The Nazis even had a book that purported to be a manual for Jewish communities that engaged in these murderous activities. The book was called *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. To Adolf Hitler's most fanatical followers, it was a cherished text of their movement that justified the worst excesses of the Holocaust. Within their coherent system of thought, it made perfect sense. The only problem was, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* was a forgery. It hadn't been written by Jewish leaders at all, but rather by those who

hated Jews. It was an early, and notorious, example of fake news. It led, indirectly, to the deaths of millions of people in Nazi concentration camps.

When Jesus was put on trial before Pilate, the Roman governor asked him, “What is truth?” It was not an expression of honest, philosophical inquiry. It was a cynical statement that despaired of there being any objective moral standard.

When Pilate asks the question, “What is truth?”, what he’s really saying is this: “I’m the governor — the official agent, in this province, of the Roman Emperor, who is god on earth. That means truth is whatever I declare it to be!”

It’s a species of the coherence theory. As long as the system of Roman power holds together — as long as the legions march, and the roads are maintained, and the sacrificial animals are slain in the temples, and as long as the occasional human victim is nailed to a cross — then truth is whatever the leaders of Rome want it to be.

Like an Old Testament prophet, Jesus of Nazareth held his own plumb line up against the corrupt society of his day. But he didn’t just hold up a plumb line, as Amos had. Jesus was *himself* the plumb line.

Remember that bold statement of his — “I am the way, the truth and the life.” *I am* the truth, Jesus says. I am the one against which you are to measure

what it means to be loving and kind and just. I do not enforce this standard with the power of armies. I invite you into accepting it not through power at all, but through weakness. Do not measure your life against the triumphal arch of the Emperor. Measure it, instead, against the bloodstained wood of the cross!

When construction workers unroll a plumb line, they generally don't touch the line. They don't move it or manipulate it in any way. They let it hang free, right next to the wall they're constructing. Looking at it is all they need to do.

In the same way, the will of God is something that hangs beside this human life of ours, but which seldom touches it. In times when you or I are uncertain what direction to take, we can glance at the divine plumb line — the example we've seen of Jesus' life — and can seek, then, to conform our lives to his. He is the way — the road we are meant to follow. He is the truth — the standard by which we are to measure our efforts to be faithful. He is the life — yes, his way is life itself.

Let us pray.

**Lord Jesus, in a world that so often seems
to be abandoning all standards,
you be our standard.
In a world that seems to be a bewildering thicket
of conflict and contention,
you be our guide.
In a world that seems in so many ways
to be headed toward destruction,**

**you be our savior.
Open our eyes, that we may see
visions of truth;
open our ears, that we may hear
voices of truth;
open our mouths,
that we may bear your truth to others. Amen.**

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