



# First United Church of Oak Park

## The Divine Plumb Line

Matthew 4:1-11

John Edgerton

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Today is the first Sunday of Lent. It is the holiest season of the year, a time of introspection and prayer, a time of fasting from those things that draw me away from God, a time of feasting upon those things that call me close to the divine. Throughout the season of Lent we will be focusing on the words of the prophets. We will dive deep into the prophetic works of the Bible and see what God might have in store for this church. Where is God calling us a community, who is God calling us to serve, what kind of future will we devote ourselves to building? This will be our theme, particularly as we are finalizing the vision for the church's future that we are building through the Capital Campaign.

God has always raised up prophets, in every era. Prophets are people who have a vision for how the world might be, and the chance to work to make that vision a reality. God has always raised up prophets, and when God raises up prophets they always start off by saying no, by saying to God that surely God has gotten it wrong, must have intended to call someone else, someone more suited to the task. The objections are as varied as the prophets themselves. This one declares that they are too young, that one that they are too old, this one that would be no good at conveying the message, that one that they don't want to bear the message at all. And 2700 years ago, God raised up a prophet named Amos. And Amos—just like all the other prophets—objects to God calling him as a prophet. He says, I don't have the relevant experience—just look at my resume. It clearly says dresser of sycamore trees; under other relevant experience it says shepherd. I don't have the qualifications necessary to be a prophet, Amos says. But his resume is of no particular interest to God.

For Amos, just like all the other prophets, God gives Amos everything he needs. And that is a vision for how the world might be, and the chance to work to make that vision a reality.

For Amos, the vision is of the great stone edifice of a building, with a plumb line held up against it. A plumb line is a kind of tool, one of those tools that is both ancient and still in use today essentially in its original form. Nothing about the plumb line has changed. A plumb line is a string with a heavy weight on one end, and it's used for constructing buildings. If you hold one end of the plumb line and let the weight drop, the string will form a line that is straight up and down. It will be straight up and down every single time. If you're standing on uneven ground, the plumb line is still straight up and down. If you're on the top of a mountain or in the middle of a desert or on the

other side of the world, it makes no difference. The plumb line will always be a straight line up and down.

So, that is pretty important, because if you then hold a plumb line up against something that is supposed to be straight, say a pillar of a building, then you can check to see if the pillar—which is supposed to be straight—lines up with the plumb line—which is definitely straight. If the pillar is crooked, you can see it right away, because there's a gap between the plumb line and the wall. There's a gap between what is supposed to be, and what actually is. Plumb lines are not for looks, either; if a pillar is crooked enough then it won't be able to support enough weight and the whole building will come tumbling down. If you want to build a building of any size, you need a plumb line.

This is what God showed me: the Lord was standing beside a wall built with a plumb line, and in God's hand was a plumb line. 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.'

Of course, this business about a plumb line, it is a vision, not construction advice. The building in the vision is a metaphor for the people of God. And the plumb line is a metaphor, too. The plumb line is a metaphor for what a prophet is supposed to do in society, or put another way: a plumb line is used for showing how the pillars of a building are supposed to be, so the building can stand straight and true.

Every society has pillars. Ideals that make that society what it is. Ideals that keep the society intact and uphold its institutions. For Amos, 2700 years ago in Israel, the central pillar of society was that all people were bound by living under the Law of God. A single set of laws—equal for everyone—a law whose legitimacy was beyond question because it came from God's own mouth, a law whose justice was above any human differences because the author of the law had no partiality. There was only one people, the people of God; there was only one law, the Law of God. Living according to the Law of God was, in fact, what made them the people of God, it's what made society more than the naked violence of the strong against the weak. That was what the Law was supposed to mean, anyway. It was supposed to be a strong and upright pillar upholding society. But how do you check if a pillar—which is supposed to be straight—really is straight? You need a plumb line. Amos the prophet held up a plumb line to society and saw that powerful and privileged were living like they were above the law—ignoring the Sabbath and cheating poor people out of what little they had earned. The powerful were allowed to do whatever they pleased with no consequences and no regard for justice. Amos saw there were really two laws: one for the downtrodden and one for the powerful. Amos held a plumb line up to society—something was crooked. Amos had the chance to work to make that vision of a just society into a reality.

Prophets are a lot like plumb lines. Nothing about the plumb line has changed; they're still essentially the same as they were 2700 years ago. Prophets are still the same as they were in the days of Amos 2700 years ago. The task of the prophet is

now ours, all of ours. We are supposed to look at the pillars of this people of God and build them so that this community can long sustain.

That's all a prophet is, really. Prophets are people who have a vision for how the world might be, and the chance to work to make that vision a reality.

Over the past two years we've been working hard alongside one another, imagining the future of the church and holding a plumb line up to it, to see what we might build. Asking ourselves, do we have the chance to make that vision a reality?

We've seen that the world is teetering on the edge of climate catastrophe. And holding a plumb line up to this place we see, we have the chance to ensure that this building demonstrates that we understand the urgency of the moment safeguarding the environment. We've seen that society at large, and our community in particular, is beset by an epidemic of loneliness. Having been driven to isolation to save our lives, we have seen our hearts laid bare that we have the chance to make this a more close-knit community. We've seen the history of this congregation, given over to this generation by the saints of the past. And in seeing that, we have the chance to ensure this community can sustain for generation after generation. We've seen the world's inequities and injustices rage like a plague, calling for people of good faith and good will to live into hope. We have the chance to invest even more deeply into good and faithful works of justice.

The plumb line of God's vision has shown us that there is good and holy work to be done by this community, and we have the chance to do it. That places our task squarely in the realm of prophets. Each of us. God is always raising up prophets, in every generation, in every nation, in every city, in every church! God may be trying to raise you up as a prophet. But I'm no prophet—you might object—I'm an accountant, for God's sake! Or maybe you're a lawyer, or maybe you're retired, or maybe you're working three jobs, or maybe you're a full-time parent, or maybe you're a high school senior, or maybe you're a shepherd, or maybe you're a dresser of sycamore trees. Your resume is of no particular concern to God. What matters to God is whether there is an ideal you love so much that you will work to make that ideal a reality.

God is always raising up prophets in every generation, and in the life of every Christian there are times when we all must ask ourselves whether God is calling us to be prophets. Is God calling you to be a prophet? A prophet who loves an ideal so much that you are willing to work to make it a reality? I am grateful for the witness of the prophets. I am grateful for their honest unwillingness. I am grateful for God's insistence. I am grateful for the holy work done in generations past. I am grateful for the holy work that stands before this generation. I am grateful for a future that we can envision. I am grateful for the work of the Gospel. May God bless us in it. Amen.