

I remember when I was a little kid, my dad had a plumb line. It was fascinating to me, but at the same time, it made perfect sense.

Because of the lead plumb, that little teardrop piece of heavy lead hanging at the end of the line, the line would be stretched perfectly straight,

regardless of whether you stood on a hill, on steps, inside or outside, at the North Pole or at the equator. It didn't matter.

If you built your wall according to the plumb line, it would be straight and true.

That is what Amos noticed: a plumb line. The cool thing about Amos was that he was so attuned to listening to God

that wherever he looked, the things around him became vehicles for understanding something about God.

That, and his being willing to speak out the truth he heard from God, made him a prophet.

Just a little history: after King Solomon died, Solomon, the son of the great King David,

the land was split apart, somewhat violently, into a Northern and Southern Kingdom, Israel in the north, Judah in the south.

Amos is from Judah, but he is prophesying in Israel; he's an outsider, he's not a local. He's from the region that—

depending upon whom you talked with—was either the *“real”* kingdom of David from which the wicked land of Israel had seceded,

or the *unfit* kingdom that had proven unworthy of David's heritage. So it must have taken him a lot of courage to speak his harsh words of prophecy in this hostile territory.

Amos says, “[Your places of worship] shall be made desolate, ...laid waste...” Your social, political and religious power structures will be wiped out, and you shall be carried away into exile.

He spoke truth to power, going right to the top, to Amaziah, the King's own priest, who reported his words to Jeroboam, the King himself,

and then turned around to denounce Amos, “O seer, go, flee away to [your own country],” ...prophecy there if you want to,

but don't ever show your face here in Bethel again, “for it is the king's sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom.”

Courage. Yet Amos was quick to say, “I'm no prophet, nor a prophet's son. I don't make my living spouting wise sayings.

I'm an ordinary herdsman, an orchard man. This comes from God, not from me. It's the Lord who is saying this to you.

It's God who showed me the plumb line, and King Jeroboam, your line is crooked from start to finish."

It seems to me that each of us has an internal plumb line, an alignment from the stars,  
through our very being, to the center of the earth. It is an internal sense of what is right and good to do.

When it comes right down to it, I think we almost always have a sense of rightness, even though we resist it like hell. And resisting is what informs our lessons today.

There are plumb lines all over the lessons. There is a plumb line in the psalm, a line between the Lord God and "those who turn their hearts to him."

It is a direct line between heaven and earth. Listen. When God's people's hearts are aligned with God, then

"Truth shall spring up from the earth, and righteousness shall look down from heaven."

"[God's] salvation is very near..." utterly, unerringly, cosmically dependable, straight as a plumb line.

And there is a plumb line in the Gospel: the life of the prophet John the Baptist, cousin and forerunner of the Messiah.

What happens when we come up against the plumb line? This story of John, Herod, Herodias, and Salome, is a microcosm of our story, at some time or another,  
a time when, according to the plumb line of doing what we know is right and wanting to do otherwise,

through envy, pride, lust, fear or other strong emotion, find ourselves in a place we don't really want to be, without the inner strength to choose differently.

The circumstances were likely less sordid but the impulses familiar none the less.

This time, many years after Jeroboam, there is another king, Herod. He's really a puppet king, conveniently kept in power by the Roman forces occupying Judea.

But within his small sphere, he has prestige, wealth, and power to (mostly) do what he wants, including marrying the unfaithful wife of his own brother.

Herod is a weak man, but he recognizes the plumb line. He is drawn to John, "he liked to listen to him," Mark tells us.

But in his privilege and his attachment to power, ego, and saving face in the opinion of others, he doesn't really let John's message in.

So in the end, he has no inner resources to stand up to the real power broker in the situation, Herodias, who truly hates John.

Unwilling to lose his false life to save his true life, he takes the life of a good and upright man, John the Baptist,

and he rues the day, because he never forgets and, in the story, fears that this Jesus, healer and miracle worker, is really John come back to haunt and condemn him.

It's interesting to me to think about Herod's "strange combination of interest and inaction."

Herod is attracted to John and perhaps on some level, to John's message of a call to repentance. He's just not willing to do anything about it.

That's the thing about the plumb line. There is a kind of singularity about it. No matter how you swing it, tip it, tie it or twist it, it always comes back to plumb.

In the same way, no matter how many loopholes you look for, no matter how many arguments you construct against it,

no matter how many self-justifications you manufacture to hide it, in the end, what you know to be right in your deepest self, remains.

And asks to be acted upon. And so we come to today's prayer, the Collect of the Day: "O Lord, mercifully receive the prayers of your people who call upon you, and grant that [we] may know and understand what things [we are called upon] to do, and also may have grace and power faithfully to accomplish them; through Jesus Christ our Lord..."

This is why prayer is central to our lives. It is prayer, both the heart-wrenching cry for courage and strength to act righteously when caught in the winds of conflicted desire, and the daily discipline that builds within us the inner resources that were entirely lacking in Herod and his unsavory family life,

discipline that in many ways keep us from the circumstances in which the plumb line hangs in unremitting judgment.

But there is another component of this story, because, clearly, we all sin. We see this fundamental element

in the Psalm and in the Epistle lesson to the church in Ephesus: God's mercy and God's prevenient Grace.

The Psalm says, Listen... listen... listen. God is speaking peace to you. Listen, turn your head, God's salvation is very near to you, right there, right beside you, right over your left shoulder, or as we sing in a beloved hymn of Celtic Christianity, "Christ be with me, Christ within me, Christ behind me, Christ before me, Christ beside me, Christ to win me, Christ to comfort and restore me. Christ beneath me, Christ above me, Christ in quiet, Christ in danger, Christ in hearts of all who love me, Christ in mouth of friend and stranger.

And in the Epistle we read, God chose you, in Christ, long, long ago, before you even had any idea, "before the foundation of the world,"

to be whole and without blame before God in love. The Epistle says, indeed, we are *destined* to be God's beloved ones,

freely, because that is the nature of God, that is what God is like, that is how God has acted in God's Incarnate Self, known to us as Jesus the Christ.

In the Beloved, that is, in Christ, we have redemption, forgiveness, the riches of prevenient grace,  
that is, Grace that is neither earned nor deserved, but rather lavished “according to God’s good pleasure,  
...a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth...so that we...might live for the praise of his glory.”

In fact, in the end, *that* is the plumb line: God’s judgment and God’s mercy are one and the same. That is the plumb line that runs through our being:  
that God created us for God’s Self, whose being is love. God created us out of love, for love. At the core of our being, that is who we are.  
We are part of God’s continuing plan, to love the world into healing and wholeness. In our deepest selves,  
that is what we long to do, and can do, more and more, as we open our hearts to God’s love.

Let us pray.

Gracious and life-giving God, by your grace, teach us and strengthen us to love you, and out of that experienced understanding, to love those we see around us, in action and with compassion. Thank you for so profoundly loving us in your Son Jesus the Christ, in whose name we pray, Amen.