

**July 15, 2007**  
**St. Paul's**

**Pentecost 7**

*Amos 7:1-17*

*Psalm 82*

*Colossians 1:1-14*

*Luke 10:25-37*

**Noticing**

Our texts for today take us back to the importance and the challenges of seeing and hearing rightly, of noticing what's right before us in ways that move us to respond. This is a piece of basic biblical business: a theme that is woven right through the Bible. It is important to bear in mind a few things about how this theme tends to work in the Bible, as we turn our attention to today's readings and what they have in mind for us.

First, life is a responsive art; we may already know that. What we don't notice can harm us, as it can harm others: "Stop, look and listen before you cross the street," we teach our children. And we try to teach corresponding good practices to motorists. What we don't notice can also become a precious opportunity lost: a good choice, a step into friendship with God and one another, a saving kindness, a precious seed of common life left unplanted. From a biblical perspective, these two are not so different from one another—life is sustained by embracing the precious opportunities given daily by God, while also actively refusing harm: "I set before you life and death; therefore choose life." Now, we might wish for a little more nuance, for a neutral state in which we might kind of avoid reckless driving, for instance, but basically 'mind our own business,' enjoy the good stuff that life has given us, in the hopes that others might do the same in

our regard—“Live and let live.” Except it never really works like that, in the Bible, at least. There, it turns out that my good stuff too often comes at the expense of my neighbour’s basic necessities.

Life is a responsive art; but we can’t respond to what we don’t or won’t take in. What we see, hear, understand has a lot to do with what moves us—what Charles Taylor refers to as our “moral sources,” –“something the love of which empowers us to do good.” (We are more able to *do* good when we are able to *sense* good.) In the Bible, sometimes, this is referred to as “the knowledge of God,” a kind of basic orientation to life that should help us know bitter from sweet, down from up, good from evil, life from death—a kind of horse-sense for people. And the prophetic literature is full of lament over the absence of this kind of people-sense. “Hear and hear, but do not understand; see and see, but do not perceive...” If we were to see with our eyes, and hear with our ears, and understand with our hearts, then we might turn and be healed (Isa 6:9,10). But first we have to be able to notice. Noticing seems to be primarily a matter of what we’re after, what we love—where our treasure is. “Seek good, and not evil, that you may live...Hate evil, and love good, and establish justice in the gate; it may be that the LORD, the God of Hosts, will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph” (Amos 6:14-15). These last words come from Amos, in the chapter just before today’s first reading.

The readings for today put this business of noticing squarely before us. Amos’ visions and encounter with Amaziah have much to do with seeing and hearing, both in connection with judgment. And Jesus’ encounter with the lawyer in the the gospel of Luke, together with its parable, reminds us also of how such

noticing is at the heart of the basic work of our life: to love God with heart, soul, might and mind; to love our neighbour as ourself. In Psalm 82 we have a counter-example. God takes on an imagined assembly of ANE divinities, to chew them out for not really having the basic qualifications for their jobs: “they have neither knowledge nor understanding, they walk about in darkness” –they can’t see or understand what is going on. And that is why the lives of the vulnerable are forfeit, why the “foundations of the earth are shaken.” The so-called gods (the ones who make our decisions for us?) have no sense whatsoever—they are incompetent to cross the street alone, says God, much less help others across. Paul, in Colossians, opens with a prayer for just that attentive discernment in the faithful of Colossae: “that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, to lead a life worthy of the Lord...bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God” (1:9b, 10).

Back to Amos. Now, Amos is a come-from-away Southerner (a Judean) prophesying away from home. He is speaking “the word of the LORD” in Bethel, a temple of the Northern kingdom of Israel, probably sometime between 760 and 750 BCE. It is clear from the international focus of his opening oracles that people’s sense of the world around them is opening up. As part of gaining the ear of the northerners, Amos starts with oracles against all their neighbours—generally not something too hard to hear. Of course it goes down hill from there.

We need to know that Israel, the northern kingdom, was experiencing a period of political stability and what passed for prosperity. The kind of prosperity it was, though, involved the accumulation of wealth in the hands of some, and the increasing impoverishment of many others—sound familiar? As prosperous and

stable as those with social and political clout feel the nation to be, it will be in ruins within some twenty to thirty years, at the hands of the Assyrians—more or less today’s Iranians. In 732, Syrian Damascus will fall to them. By 721, the Northern capital of Samaria will also have fallen. Imagine that here today: what if someone got up this morning and told us that within twenty, thirty years we’d all be living under Iranian – or American – domination? It’s a lot like that.

Now Amos is a cattleman, or a shepherd, from Tekoa in the South. It’s important in today’s readings for us to understand that he is not a “professional” prophet. He had another identity, another livelihood. There *were* professional prophets, members of prophetic guilds that probably took different forms in different places and at different times. We might tend to think ill of these official prophets, for one reason or another. It might be closer to the mark, though, if we were simply to think of them as “ordained” prophets. They were prophesying with a license, as part of a larger social and religious body, with corresponding accountabilities and a stipend, much as our ordained clergy do today. That being said, Amos was not one of them. That’s what he means when he affirms that he is not a prophet nor is he one of the sons of the prophets. He’s not a card carrying member of any guild. He’s just been drafted for the occasion. He was not looking for this favour.

He may not be a professional, but boy he sure has a lively sense of God and what God asks. Listen to this:

He who made the Pleiades and Orion, and turns deep darkness into the morning, and darkens the day into night,  
who calls for the waters of the sea,

and pours them out upon the surface of the earth,  
 the LORD is his name,  
 who makes destruction flash forth against the strong,  
 so that destruction comes upon the fortress” (Amos 5:8-9)

In chapter 7, God has something to show Amos: in two visions and then a third. First Amos sees God forming locusts that eat up all the land’s grain—a spectre of famine. Moved by pity, he cries out: “LORD God, repent, I beseech you. How can Jacob stand? He is so small.” And God withholds: “It shall not be.” This happens a second time, with an even more terrifying vision of judgment by fire, devouring the great waters and eating up the land itself. Amos cries out, “LORD God, cease! I beseech you.” “This too, shall not be,” says God. Now, why bother with these two visions, if indeed, they shall not be?

Well, the reason is: there is much to see already. For instance, the prophet and the LORD God are plainly grieved for the people’s plight; they are moved for the sake of their life and the life of the land itself. “I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have called you and you are mine.” This is always the starting point—always. God is not, in fact, vindictive, punishing. Amos is not an upstart come-from-away presiding gleefully over the Northern kingdom’s collapse. These first visions show love, grief, a tender desire to protect.

The third vision is, of course, more developed. Not only does God show Amos something, he also asks for the first time, for Amos to tell him what he sees. The answer is: “a plumb-line.” “Behold [that’s the Bible’s “look here!” word]—Behold! —I am setting a plumb line in the midst of my people Israel.”

Does everyone know what a plumb-line is? Anyone who’s ever built a freestanding wall or, for that matter shingled one or hung wallpaper on one,

knows how handy a tool it can be. It's a wonderfully simple thing—a weight on the end of a cord, that works with the way things like to fall straight downwards on this planet, thanks to the peculiarities of earth's gravity. It helps you tell straight from crooked, which can be important not only for the way the wallpaper looks in the end but, more importantly, for knowing when a building is even structurally sound, safe for habitation. Our garage, sadly, may be a case in point. Bulges and non-perpendicular angles relative to the level are, generally speaking, not good indicators for the future integrity of a wall.

Back to what God shows Amos, and what Amos indeed is able to see: judgment in the end is not so much what God is doing, but rather what God is showing: the house is not sound. Jacob cannot stand: not, in the end, because “he is so small,” but simply because there is no soundness in him. Jacob, that is the Northern Kingdom of Israel, has the structural properties of something on its way to becoming “waste,” and “a desolation.” Amos, this time, has nothing to say. What can he say? God has shown it to him in a form that he gets all too well; it's a kind of visual illustration of the content of his prophetic preaching to this point in the book. How can he not get it?

We started out this morning talking about a few background biblical basics. Another one of them is hope. Sometimes hope is false; the prophets speak against that. (It's like declaring a wound healed, even though it continues festering.) Amos is, by virtue of his calling, on the side of what God shows him to be real, even if it turns out to be grievous. Hope, whatever form it will take, must pass through here. If the house is unsound, there is no point in declaring that life can continue within its shelter. This is sad, but true. God says, “I will not pass

again before my people Israel.” And yet, God still calls them, “my people Israel.” So perhaps there will be another page in this story, yet.

Maybe the locusts and the fire will not be called forth in judgment. Maybe global warming will not do us in, and perhaps the fisheries will yet rebound. But it turns out that the house is unsound, nevertheless. It’s not about whether we escape this or that particular disaster; it’s about the whole construction: It is coming down. Perhaps the plumb-line should come out sooner—perhaps we might let our own eyes be tutored, even as we keep building our common life.

Do you remember the Parish House last year? When you keep the plumb-line handy, you can sometimes get the people out and correct the problem *before* the structure collapses.

They say that it would take five planet earths to provide for all the earth’s human inhabitants at the level of consumption that we practice in North America. They also say our way of life is not up for negotiation. Ought we to notice something here? Is this sustainable? What are we building towards? A ruin, or God’s sheltering city? (I offer this as an example; your own eye might surely suggest other areas for the plumb-line’s judgment.)

It is the case, as Psalm 82 in its way points out, that there are gods—of a sort—that don’t really have what it takes for the job. We find them pretty quickly in ourselves when we come up against the things we don’t want to change in our individual and common lives, even though we may be surrounded by evidence of a problem.

What examples are there in our lives of things that we, fatally perhaps, are not noticing? Where are the gods that guide us actually incompetent for life?

What are we hearing and hearing but not understanding...where we *might* instead see, hear, turn and be saved?

Of course there would be more than one answer to such questions. They are worth our time, though, and our ongoing common discernment. In every part of life we are confronted with life and death, right here in the midst of this glorious and sadly violated world so profoundly beloved of God. The practice of hope, to return yet again to those biblical basics, is the practice of seeking to live rooted in life, eyes open and yet without being ruled by fear—which is another god of sorts, I think, even though sometimes we may indeed also know fear. To hope is, in fact, as the lawyer says, to cleave to God with everything we've got, which takes us quickly to that other commandment, the one "like unto it," namely to recognize and to care for our neighbour as indeed our other self.

As we think about prophetic calling here at St. Paul's, let's pray for eyes and ears that just keep on growing in their preference for what is real; let's pray for hearts, souls, minds and might rooted in the love of our LORD God and for the sake of what God loves—and not forgetting the other commandment which is, indeed, like unto the first: to love the other self who is our neighbour.

Maria Harris wrote somewhere that we have to "love our crooked neighbour with all our crooked heart." None of this is easy; it is hard for neighbour Amos and, at least on that one day, it proved impossible for neighbour Amaziah, whose ears were too full already. It was hard, too, for our lawyer neighbour who, at least at the beginning of his conversation with Jesus was looking for ways to limit his liability (as don't we all by times?). For today, though, our hope is nourished by our neighbour Samaritan who, "by showing

mercy” on a man left beaten along the crooked road that goes down from Jerusalem to Jericho, proved a neighbour to that man. He *noticed*, didn’t he? And so, Jesus tells us, we should “go and do likewise.”

Let us go, then, and do so with the help of God, who, as Dag Hammarskjold points out, somehow “writes straight with crooked lines.” Amen.

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