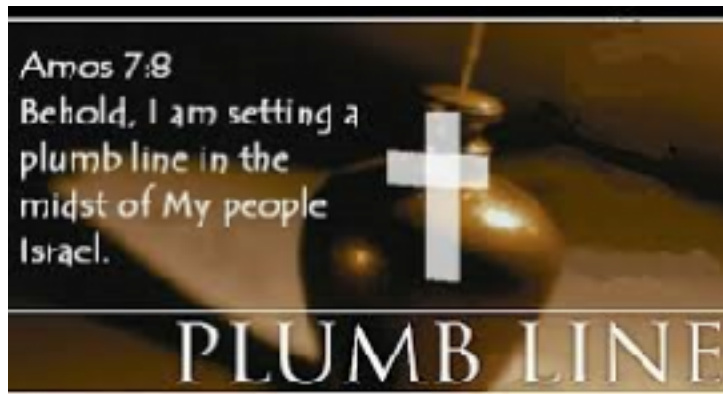


Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
Fifth Sunday after Pentecost
“A Prophet’s Plumb-Line”
Second of Three Messages in a Sermon Series Entitled
“Our Local Prophets”
The Reverend Dr. Scott Everett Couper
Hebrew Scripture: Amos 7:7-17
Christian Scripture: Luke 10:25-28
Sunday, 14 July 2019



Today, we continue with our second of three sermons in our series entitled “Our Local Prophets” wherein we delve into the ecclesiastical biography of some of our church’s former ministers. While we look at the legacies of our ministers, we also learn about some of the biblical prophets. Finally, if you have not yet noticed, I also make all this ‘walking down memory lane’ relevant by touching-upon current events.



Last week, we examined Elisha’s healing of Naaman, which we linked to the Reverend Milton Stacy Czatt’s stand against the unjust internment of Japanese-Americans during World War II. From their stories, we concluded that our God is universal, transcends national and racial boundaries, and does not exclude anyone from the Kingdom. We related their times with our own.



As we read with shock the desperate news from our country’s southern border, we remember that the Hebrew scriptures command that “The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt” (Leviticus 19:34) and “Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me” (Matthew 25:40).

For our sermon series, there are lots of prophets and lots of stories from which to choose. Last week was Elisha.



This week could be Elijah. Once there was Sunday school teacher who carefully explained the story of Elijah and the false prophets of Baal. She explained how Elijah built the altar, put wood upon it, cut the cattle in pieces, and laid it upon the altar. Then Elijah commanded the people of God to fill four barrels of water and pour it over the altar. He had them do this four times. "Now", asked the teacher, "can anyone in the class tell me why the Lord would have Elijah pour water over the cattle on the altar?" A little girl in the back of the room raised her hand with great enthusiasm: "To make the gravy."

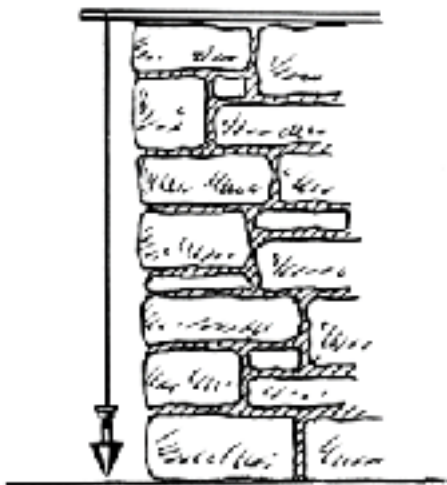


This week we examine the prophet Amos. Amos lived during the reign of King Jeroboam II. What is important for us to know is that the prophet Amos preached during a time of great prosperity in Israel.¹ In other words, the economy was great! The DOW and the NASDAQ, the market, were up. People were making profits and thus lots of money. But Amos argued that Israel was not doing so well in God's sight. Amos accused the nation of selling righteousness for silver. Much was being sacrificed for a good economy. Amos preached that though many people were getting rich and living well, they did so by oppressing the poor. Back deals were being made, bribes were being taken. Today, we call that 'corporate lobbying' (no matter what administration holds power). Amos cried that the needy were being pushed aside at the gate.

¹ Generic thoughts about Amos and his time were gleaned from: Lauren Keane, "Commentary: A Biblical 'Plumb-line' Remains a Relevant Allegory", *Los Angeles Times*, 18 July 2016.



The story of Amos claims that God desired to punish Israel for failing to structure society by God's standards of justice and righteousness. Amos pleaded for God not to be unduly harsh. God basically relented and said, 'I am setting-up a plumb-line by which I and the nation can judge whether your society is healthy by my standards' (Amos 7:8). (See below Sunday service order image.)



A plumb-line is a weight that hangs from a string. As I understand it, gravity causes the string to hang at a perfect ninety-degree angle. If held against a wall of a structure, it can be judged if the wall is straight, justified, and centered - or, if it is crooked. A wall can be standing; it can even bare weight. But if it is crooked, it is not stable.



God presented a plumb-line and told Amos and the Israelite nation ‘if the most vulnerable in your land are not cared for, if they do not adequate housing, education, health care and justice, then your society is sick, and the consequences will be dire’ (Amos 7:17).

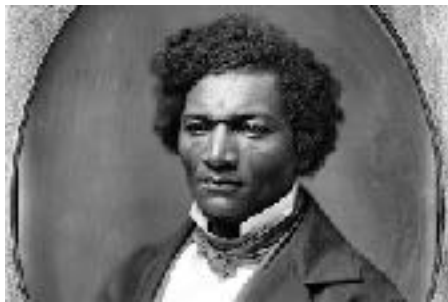


On Friday, April 15, 1865 the President of the United States of America was assassinated in Ford’s Theatre. Early the next morning, Saturday, he died. On Wednesday, April 19, the minister of our Centre Congregational Church, the Reverend George Tyler, delivered “A Discourse on the Death of President Lincoln” entitled “A Successful Life”.² (Reverend Tyler, by the way, is the only minister who was raised in Centre church and later became its minister.³) *The Vermont Record*

² Tyler, Rev. G.P. “The Successful Life: A Discourse on the Death of President Lincoln”, delivered at the Centre Church, Brattleboro, 19 April 1865.

³ vander Meulen, Dorothy, *This Jewel on Main Street: Centre Congregational Church at 200 Years, 1816-2016*, (Manchester Center, VT: Shires Press, 2016), p. 13.

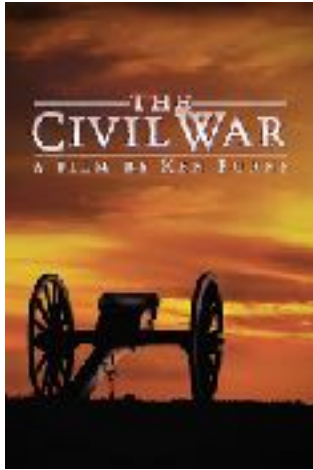
announced that on Sunday, April 23, “all places of public business will be closed [...] at noon, and remain so until the close of the funeral services to be held, at that hour, in honor of President Lincoln, at the Centre Church. Rev. Dr. Tyler will preach a funeral discourse. The various religious congregations in town are expected to unite with that of the Centre Church in these service”. The War Department gave directions to Brattleboro in regard to the guns which were scheduled to be fired on the half hour from sunrise to sunset.



Also fascinating is that Frederick Douglass, ‘a world renowned coloured orator,’ was scheduled to deliver a lecture on Tuesday, April 25th.⁴ However, the chaos in New York City caused by the assassination prevented his travel from there to Vermont to lecture.⁵

⁴ Newspaper advertisement, source unknown, date unknown, April 1865. Centre Congregational Church archive.

⁵ Letter to Dorothy vander Meulen from Thomas St. John, 27 March 2008. Centre Congregational Church archive.



I recently watched the entire epic series produced by Ken Burns about the Civil War. The film termed racism and thus slavery as the United States' 'Original Sin'. Our Constitution was in part sinful, for it declared Blacks, like my daughter, to be 'three-fifths' human. Why? Well, white southerners wanted to count those enslaved, though they, of course, had no representation, as if they were people who, at least in part, were represented. This so-called compromise was a lie, piled on top of hypocrisy, piled on top of sin. The plumb-line from the beginning was crooked. If we place the sin of cultural and physical genocide and theft against Native Americans on top of the sin of racism and slavery, it could be arguably considered if there even was 'line' which a plumb could measure.



On Wednesday, April 19th, “a portrait of Mr. Lincoln was suspended in the alcove behind the pulpit [at Centre Congregational Church] and surmounted with a wreath of laurel. A handsome bouquet of arbutus flowers and another of white roses and evergreen were placed in front of the pulpit”.⁶ In his eulogy of Abraham Lincoln, our minister spoke of how the plumb-line of the United States was crooked from the beginning. The Reverend Tyler preached in *this* church how the blood of 600,000 soldiers who died the Civil War was shed because of the crooked plumb-line that was the United States of America from its founding.



⁶ Transcription of Brattleboro newspaper article, April 1865. Source and date unknown.

In his eulogy, Tyler spoke of Lincoln as a prophet: “He must have often thought of the multitudes of men, women, and little ones, doomed to bear a life-long sorrow to the grave [...]. He saw this evil, saw it persisted in, glorified in, by many. Every day he contended with men who, who for the bad objective of enslavement of the blacks, were ready to sacrifice any number of whites. Day by day he saw these rebel leaders, readily supported by multitudes of kindred spirit, falsehood the most foul, knavery the most unblushing, cruelty the most unrelenting, making a chapter of history darker with crime than was ever before written by man”.⁷



⁷ Today, we see in our times a conscious effort to stop the ‘browning of America’. From the first days of the current administration, legal means were sought to limit the entry in the country those of the Islamic faith. Currently, there are desperate measures to ask a question in the census that is intended to limit the counting of those physically present in our country (who are, more often than not, people of color). There is long-enacted legislation, for example in Florida, that prohibits people convicted of crimes (disproportionately people of color) from voting despite the fact that they have completed their sentences. The leader of our country equated hate-fuelled neo-Nazi’s with ‘good people’ who believe this country should not discriminate against Jews, Blacks, Muslims or anyone who is not a white Christian. Efforts are underway to limit immigration to those who wish to live with their families that legally reside in the USA (though this is how the first wife’s family immigrated to the USA). Gerrymandering continues to allow elected officials to choose their constituency rather than constituencies choosing their leaders (often people of color are carved-out of voting districts). Even the Electoral College system, has warped democratic intentions so that candidates who receive a majority vote, still lose the national election, not once, but twice.

The sin of racism persists from our nation's founding until today.⁸ Even after the Civil War, through Reconstruction during Ulysses S. Grant's term as President, Blacks in the south were imprisoned for loitering, having neither homes nor employment. 'Jim Crow' laws were legislated keeping Blacks marginalized. Segregation was instituted. Even today, the United States incarcerates the largest percentage of its population as compared with other nations, even Russia and China.⁹ In the United States, people of color disproportionately affected by mass incarceration as private prisons earn profits from it.



⁸ For more information, view the documentary "13th".

13th is a 2016 American [documentary](#) by director [Ava DuVernay](#). The film explores the "intersection of race, justice, and mass incarceration in the United States;"^[3] it is titled after the [Thirteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution](#), adopted in 1865, which abolished slavery throughout the United States and ended [involuntary servitude](#) except as a [punishment for conviction of a crime](#). DuVernay contends that slavery has been perpetuated since the end of the [American Civil War](#) through criminalizing behavior and enabling police to arrest poor [freedmen](#) and force them to work for the state under [convict leasing](#); suppression of African Americans by [disenfranchisement](#), [lynchings](#) and [Jim Crow](#); politicians declaring a [war on drugs](#) that weigh more heavily on minority communities and, by the late 20th century, [mass incarceration](#) of people of color in the United States. She examines the [prison-industrial complex](#) and the emerging detention-industrial complex, discussing how much money is being made by corporations from such incarcerations. *13th* garnered acclaim from a number of film critics. It was nominated for the [Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature](#) at the [89th Academy Awards](#), and won the [Primetime Emmy Award for Outstanding Documentary or Nonfiction Special](#) at the [69th Primetime Emmy Awards](#).^[4] On the other hand, *New York* magazine film critic [David Edelstein](#) writing in [Vulture](#) noted: "You'd think from *13th* that crime didn't exist."^[5]

⁹ Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_incarceration_rate Accessed, 14 July 2019.

At the end of his sermon, Tyler quoted Abraham Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address (also found in your Sunday worship service order) which reads: "Fondly do we hope, reverently do we pray, that this scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God will[s] that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bondman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, still must be said that 'the judgements of the Lord are true and righteous altogether'" [Psalm 19:9]. Sounds like Amos!



Friends in Christ, Amos' words were understood to be too hard to hear. The nation and its leaders desired Amos exiled. Much of the United States also could not tolerate Lincoln's words and deeds. And he was assassinated for his principled stands. May we as a people in this day and age of economic prosperity choose to obey our 'prophets' with a 'ph' and not our 'profits' with an 'f'.

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This was the word of God, and it was preached to the people of God, and the people of God responded, “Amen”.