

Amos 7:7-15

In Pisa, Italy there stands a tower; quite high actually; and this tower is known for its lean: the Leaning Tower of Pisa. The top of the tower is nearly thirteen feet off from the center of its base. In the 16th century Galileo is said to have dropped two cannonballs of different masses from the tower to prove his theory of gravitational descent. During World War II the Nazis used the tower as an observation post. But tourists flock to the city of Pisa not because of the history of the tower; they come because of the tower's lean.

It stands as a monument to the failure of mankind. Poor planning, poor architectural designing, poor construction...call it what you will. Tourists come to gawk at this leaning tower, while it still stands, because everyone knows that one day it will fall with a mighty crash.

Yet we do not need to travel to Italy to gaze upon human failure. We have it here in our own country; in our own community; yes, in our own lives. Perhaps we can blame our nation's failures on others. Maybe not so much those in our community. And certainly not the failures within us. We ourselves are to blame. I, and I alone, am responsible.

In our Old Testament text God holds out a plumb line to the prophet Amos. A plumb line is a string with a weight on the end. The plumb, or weight, when dropped is an accurate vertical measure. Dropping a plumb line off the top of the Leaning Tower of Pisa it shows a twelve feet ten inch lean. But you don't need a plumb line to see that it's leaning. It's obvious to the naked eye.

That plumb line is still in God's hand today. It shows how far our society has fallen away from God. Case in point, our nation has been murdering babies in the womb, with legal protection, for forty five years. And now that a Supreme Court nominee might be endorsed who could help to make such infant murder illegal again, scores of people across our land are furious with rage.

This nation is increasingly opposing God in every way imaginable. Compare it to the Leaning Tower of Pisa. If that tower leans more and more, its fall is coming quickly. And so with our nation. If we continue to lean away from God at the pace we are going, our fall cannot be far off. Let us daily pray that we, as a nation of people, repent of the many ways in which we are opposing the ways of God.

Now perhaps we don't mind so much seeing God's plumb line being dropped against our nation. But we do not like seeing it being dropped against us. We don't think we need it. Using the naked eye to measure ourselves and our piety, we think our lives are standing up pretty straight. We see how far off kilter our nation is; how far off our neighbor is, and we actually become the plumb line to judge them. But judge not, says God, in this way. He is the Judge. His Law (the Ten Commandments) is the plumb line, and we are not in line with His perfect will.

You and I are leaning away from God. His plumb line is accurate; it does not lie. But when we close our ears to God's plumb line, and stop applying His Law to ourselves, our naked eye judges that we are okay. So we must repent, close our eyes, and hear His Law so that God's plumb line speaks to us and shows us that we are leaning away from Him.

When Amos spoke of God's plumb line to the people of Israel, they became furious. "Take your plumb line and get out of here!" Amos was told. But it wasn't Amos' plumb line. The words against Israel were not Amos' words. These all came from God.

And so with us. The plumb line is not in the hand of the preacher but in the hand of God. It's not the preacher calling sinners to repentance but God through the preacher. And repent we must. The people of Israel did not. And God's judgment came not long after the people heard the words of the prophet calling them to repentance.

God will judge all who refuse to repent - back in the day of Amos, and in our own day. But this is not what He delights in doing. He delights rather in showing mercy. There are two ways that God is showing mercy to you. He has brought you here to His house this day to see the plumb line in His hand. Calling sinners like you and me to repentance is an act of God's mercy. If He was not merciful, He would let us continue as we are. And we would follow the course of the tower in Pisa and lean further and further away from God until the day of our judgment. God is merciful, my friend, when He preaches His Law into our ears; when He holds out to us the plumb line in His hand.

But no one can be saved with a plumb line. We cannot straighten up our lives to the point where we are good enough for God. And so God in mercy invites you, bids you to look closely at His hand that is holding the plumb line. His hand is scarred. It has the mark of a nail in it. That hand was nailed to a cross. And this means everything for you. Your Lord hung on a cross; a cross that stood straight up from earth to heaven just like a plumb line. And that cross, my friend, is the measure that God uses for you. Jesus' blood ran down that cross. It was for you that He bled. It was your sin that He bore. Standing next to Jesus' cross, you are declared by God to be perfectly straight, holy and blameless, because you are forgiven.

Whatever you have done in your past to lean away from God, in the cross of Jesus He leans toward you in love. Not one of you is leaning so badly that there is no hope for you. Where sin increases, writes the Apostle Paul, God's grace increases even more. This is not an excuse to keep leaning, but it is a reason to glorify God; to seek to please Him by how we live.

And if the tower of your life is ready to fall, then fall into the water of your baptism; for there is no plumb line there; no judgment against you; only mercy. There is forgiveness for you in those precious waters. That hand of God with the mark of the nail is the hand that sprinkled those waters over you. It's the hand that holds you when you are frightened. The hand that leads you in life. And it's the hand that will carry you to heaven when you die. Yes, it holds a plumb line, for we must live lives of repentance. But even more, we need the mercy and grace given by that hand. As you come forward today to receive the body and blood of your Lord Jesus Christ, see this meal as a meal of grace. See your Lord leaning toward you with forgiveness for you.

And since He leans toward you in this way, this is how you and I can lean toward each other. Not in judgment. Not holding out a plumb line against each other. But holding out the hand of friendship. Showing the same love that God has shown to us. Forgiving as we are forgiven. We do not live by the plumb line. We live under the cross of our Lord. We live in the water of our baptism. This is who we are in Christ Jesus. Amen.