Whenever I read or hear the words of Amos, I am taken back to the heady days of my seminary life in the late 1960s. Those were the days of the civil rights protests, the anti-war movement, the beginnings of the sexual revolution; do you remember them? They were days when the words of the prophets, like the passage read this morning, sounded the clarion call to take a stand, to make a statement, to engage the church in all kinds of acts that dared to speak truth to power – or at least what some of us were convinced was “truth”. It was also the “Age of Aquarius”. How many of you remember the tribal rock musical “Hair?” That was perhaps the quintessential expression of the rebellion that was going on in those days: love, protest, and hair “down to here.” For my part, I admit it; I was caught up in all of it, if only from an arms-length. It is when I grew my mustache – my lip-service to radicalism I called it.

This was also when I underwent what were called then “The Trials for Ordination” in the Presbyterian Church. Among the many items in those trials, I had to do a biblical exegesis on a passage of scripture that I got to choose. Then I had to write a sermon on that text, using my work, and preach it before Pittsburgh Presbytery. In my all too arrogant way, I figured I would do an Old Testament text, and thereby have to do my exegesis in Hebrew. I was sure not many of my readers would remember Hebrew well enough to critique my work too harshly. The text I chose was this Amos 7 text. That was my first encounter with the words of this prophet, and with some of the forces and issues Amos faced in his day, and these words he heard from God. It was a great text for me to wrestle with, and I have been doing that ever since.

Back in Amos’s time (@760 BCE), and still now, when I listen to this text I hear the prophet speaking a word from Yahweh against the practices and excesses of both the political and religious establishments of his day. These are words that still matter, I believe, for the same establishments of our day. Jeroboam II (793-753 BCE) was the king in Israel, the northern kingdom. He had one of the longest and most prosperous reigns of any of the kings. But the poor and the widows and the orphans of the land were sorely neglected. Amaziah was the chief priest at the royal sanctuary at Bethel, but he spoke nary a word of reproof or correction to the political, military and economic elite. Into this situation, ripe with risk and in deep need of reform, God sent God’s prophet, Amos. There are five visions about what is going on and the consequences if justice and righteousness are not restored. Do you see how a seminary “radical” would be attracted to this text? I sure was.

The vision in our lesson of the Plumb Line is the third of the five visions given to Amos. And all by itself its words matter. A “plumb line”, as you builders, architects, and construction folk know, is a weighted line of string, which when held up against a structure – like a wall – will tell you when that structure is straight and true. And that is the picture here. The Lord is holding the plumb line of his commandments, statutes and
ordinances about right living beside the “wall” of the people of Israel. And that wall is leaning. It is not true and straight. Yahweh sends Amos to speak a word to the king and the priest and the nation. It is a word of judgment, of warning. This wall, this people, this nation and its society will collapse if it is not righted. Can you imagine hearing such a word, let alone having to speak it? Back in 1969, I and others like me could hardly wait to speak it, especially to a stodgy old institution like Pittsburgh Presbytery.

Well, there is judgment here in these words, and these words do matter. But as I have wrestled with these words over the last 40+ years, I keep learning more and more of what is in here. This time I have heard a word about our relationship with God. It is intimate and it is spiritual. And, it all revolves around two Hebrew words both used in this passage, in the same verse (vs. 8), and both have a similar sound in the original text.¹

The first word is ‘anak. English translators have read this word as “plumb line”. But the Hebrew word has something to do with tin, with the metal tin. And the location at which God takes a stand with the ‘anak is described as a wall of ‘anak – a wall of tin. Since the wall and the item God holds share a metallic feature, it is logical to connect them through the translation “plumb line”. While the image fits with Israel’s failure to measure up to her covenantal duties of justice and equity for all in the kingdom, what this picture does not capture is God’s firm, metallic, steely resolve with regards to his people. God has spoken a word, the people have covenanted to follow it, and now, their king and their priests are no longer keeping that word. God’s word matters, my friends. It is firm; it is sure; it matters. It does matter that we do justice, and love mercy, and walk humbly with our God (Micah 6:8). And God would remind them and us of this still solid word. Even though they, and we, stray from it, neglect it, even forget it, God does not break God’s words or requirements or relationships with God’s people. God stays connected to us. Do we stay connected to God? Especially when we might be among the unjust? Do we even ask about it – as surely the events that unfolded in Florida just last evening must put before us?

The second word is also found in verse 8. It is the word ‘abar. Can you hear some of the similarity? God says, “I have set my ‘anak in the midst of my people; I will never again ‘abar pass them by. This word, ‘abar is a very intimate word, because it is the same word that is used when the Lord told Moses he would reveal “my glory” to you when I “pass by” you in the cleft of the mountain (Exodus 33:17-22.) To “pass by” then is for God to open God’s self to this man, Moses. And while there is a word of judgment to God’s people in Amos, there is also this word about God’s care and revelation and intimate opening of his very nature to God’s people.

“See, I am setting a plumb line
in the midst of my people Israel;
I will never again pass them by.”

I take that to mean: God’s judgment comes, it matters, but even in judgment God does not say we no longer matter to God. God’s judgment reveals God’s very closeness with us, and that too matters for our spiritual, personal and civil life.

The guy who the Presbytery appointed to read my exegesis and sermon was Malcolm Alexander. He was a neighbor just a few streets away from where my family lived in Glenshaw. I played with his son, Bobby. I knew Dr. Alexander, and he knew me. He was also professor of Hebrew at Pittsburgh Seminary. Gotcha! I’ll never forget his hand written comment on my paper and sermon. He said: “What you say here has merit.” Ah, I felt vindicated. I had come down hard on a church and preachers who resisted – like Amaziah the priest – speaking truth to power. And then Dr. Alexander added: “Just remember, in ordination you are becoming one of the people and part of the very structure you are taking to task.” Ah, I am a part of what I am criticizing. Old Malcolm was right. I was then and I am now, and so are you. Am I as open to God as God is to me? Am I as faithful to God’s word as God remains faithful and asks me to become, even, and especially, when I have strayed? These old words matter, my friends. God still is our God even when you and I fail at being God’s just
and loving people. Maybe it is especially in such times, because God knows our deepest need in such times of failure. And we matter to God at all times and in all places.

NOTE

1. I am indebted to Elna K. Solvang, “Commentary on Amos 7:7-15” in www.workingpreacher.org 7/6/2013, for these insights.