

I used to be part of the team that graded the General Ordination Exams. Those tests are the Episcopal Church's national board exams for seniors who are about to graduate from seminary and be ordained.

And on those tests, there was one error that would almost automatically flunk prospective priests on the Bible section.

That error was making an overly strong distinction between God's character in the Old Testament and in the New Testament. It's a common error. I've heard it many times—it's a false dichotomy. God in the Old Testament is an angry, vengeful, blood-thirsty, destructive God. God in the New Testament is a peaceful, kind and loving God.

That idea of a harsh Old Testament God is out there. I remember the scene from the 1984 movie, *Ghostbusters*.

The Bill Murray character says to the mayor:
 "(You need to) accept the fact that this city is headed for a disaster of biblical proportions."

The Mayor asks, "What do you mean, 'biblical'?"

The four Ghostbusters reply in turn:
 "What he means is Old Testament, Mr. Mayor, real wrath-of-God type stuff. Fire and brimstone coming down from the sky! Rivers and seas boiling!"
 "Forty years of darkness! Earthquakes, volcanoes..."
 "The dead rising from the grave!"
 "Human sacrifice, dogs and cats living together, mass hysteria!"

So, this idea that God in the Old Testament is a God of destruction is out there. And it's not new.

There was even an early heresy in Christianity that wrongly claimed the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New Testament were actually two different gods. This heretical group went on to view Jesus as being sent on a divine rescue mission by his loving Father, a Christian God, the God of the New Testament. They said Jesus was sent to rescue people from the clutches of the evil Jewish God of the Old Testament.

But there are not two different Gods. And God is not bi-polar. And God wasn't having some bad-hair day in the Old Testament, but then got his act together in the New Testament. God is the same God throughout. That's the specific reason for the lines in the Nicene Creed about the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit "proceeds from the Father (and the Son),"¹ and "He has spoken through the Prophets." In other words, the God of the Old and New Testaments is the same God.

¹ This phrase "and the Son", was never part of the original creed, and was added gradually in the west beginning in Toledo, Spain, in 589 AD, but never accepted in the east.

Now, our human understandings of who God is undoubtedly grew and developed as people got to know God more and more. I would certainly contend that in scripture you can see a trajectory of growth in human understandings of who God is. And we Christians claim that we know God most completely in the person of Jesus Christ. But the God who is made known in Jesus is also the God who has spoken through the prophets. They are one and the same.

Having said all that, there are certainly tough sections of the Old Testament. Case in point is with the prophets. It may seem that the prophets are often delivering messages of doom and gloom.

Our Old Testament readings this year in the summer and fall focus on the prophets. And their writings are often challenging. And this summer and this fall we will have a number of Old Testament readings where the various prophets are letting people know that God is not happy with their behavior. These prophets often speak words of warning. They are often asking the people to change their ways.

But... and this is such an important but... BUT the prophets are asking the people to change their ways SO THAT they may align themselves more and more with God's will. It's not arbitrary. And it's not because God is evil. And it's not because God is trying to ruin people's fun. It's because the people are acting badly, and/or treating each other badly.

Our reading this week is from the Prophet Amos. Amos is the oldest of the prophets to leave behind a record, a collection of his prophecies.

The past few weeks we've heard stories about the great prophets Elijah and Elisha. But those are stories about them. We don't have much of a record of what they said.

Not so with Amos. Amos has left us his prophecies. And in Amos, God calls the people to change their ways. And we know exactly why.

One of the charges is that justice is for sale.² The rich bribe the judges to rule in their favor, and thus always win their court cases.

But through Amos, God calls the people to amend their ways. And if they don't, God promises to step in and correct these abuses. God says,
"Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream."³

Justice will not be dammed up by bribery. Justice will flow like the waters of a flood, or of a never-ending stream.

27 centuries after Amos, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., would use these words again in his "I have a dream" speech. And those words are inscribed today on the Civil Rights Memorial in Montgomery, Alabama.

² Amos 5:12

³ Amos 5:24

In fact, our American ideal of "justice for all" traces its lineage back to the prophet Amos.

And part of the call of the prophet Amos is for us to remember that justice for all is not just an American ideal. It is ultimately God's standard. And if we forget that fact, or ignore that fact, then God promises to intervene to ultimately set things right, until justice flows again like an unrestricted never-failing stream.

And God setting such a standard is not about God being harsh or arbitrary or trying to ruin anyone's fun. Instead, it's about God calling us to do the right thing.

Another charge God makes in Amos is that merchants are getting rich by cheating the poor. We will hear God speaking these words in our lesson from Amos next week:

"Hear this, you that trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land, saying... 'We will make the ephah small and the shekel great, and practice deceit with false balances... and (sell) the sweepings with the wheat.'"⁴

What's this charge from God about? It's about selling wheat. First, the merchants are making the ephah small. That means that they are using a false measuring cup, a smaller measuring cup to measure out the wheat they're selling. Folks are not getting the amount they're paying for.

And what's worse, the merchants are also making the shekel great. That means that the merchants are using false weights on the balances. So people are getting overcharged when they're measuring out the silver they're giving in payment.

And on top of that, the merchants are changing the mix—they're selling adulterated wheat, wheat mixed with chaff, with the sweepings from the threshing floor. That makes it a triple deception.

So not only are the merchants giving a smaller measure of wheat and lying about it. The wheat isn't pure wheat. And they're also ripping people off by overcharging them more silver.

Now, there's nothing wrong with merchants making an honest profit (p-r-o-f-i-t). But when you try to make more profit immorally by overcharging people and giving them less than you say you're giving them, God is not pleased. That's the message of the prophet, p-r-o-p-h-e-t.

Which brings us to our Old Testament lesson today.

In this section of Amos, God talks about setting a plumb line in the midst of his people.

⁴ Amos 8:4-6

A plumb line is nothing more than a long string with a metal weight at the end. The force of gravity pulls the string and the weight straight down. Then builders and stone masons could then compare the lines of their walls to their plumb lines. The plumb line would tell them whether their walls were straight or crooked.

But in Amos, God is not talking about the construction of a physical wall. God says he is going to use a plumb line to see how his people measure up. Are they aligned with him? Or not?

We all know what happens to older buildings. As time passes, the foundation may settle unevenly. Floors may start to slope. Walls may start to lean. The buildings may have been perfectly level when they were built. But over time, they often become out of alignment, they grow more and more slanted.

So, Amos says, God is setting his plumb line in the midst of his people. And God is finding that his once level building is now leaning.

Amos is telling the people that they have leaned so far away from the will of God that drastic measures are needed. Braces and trusses won't work anymore. Shoring up the foundation here and there won't be enough. Instead, God is going to have to tear down in order to do some major remodeling.

The thrust of the message in Amos is rather harsh. The people no longer measure up to God's standards. And some major renovation is going to be necessary.

Again, this is not because God is arbitrary. And it's not because God is trying to ruin people's fun. It's because the people are acting badly, and/or treating each other badly.

So what does this have to do with us?

I would contend that the image of God's plumb line is still important. We need to constantly check and recheck the walls we build in our lives. Sometimes, we have to let go of some of the walls that aren't in alignment with what God creates and calls us to be. We may have to repent, and go through personal demolition and remodeling.

And we need to do our level best—yes, that's an intentional pun—we need to do our level best to check our walls. We may need to realign our bricks if the mortar is still fresh. We may need to tear down and rebuild if our bad habits are old and set in concrete. And in doing so, we constantly need to keep our eyes on God's standards. We need to strive to be the people he created and calls us to be.

Are we acting lovingly? Are we treating others the way we would want to be treated? Are we making our livings honestly?

Ultimately, are we doing what we hear about in our Gospel lesson? Are we loving the Lord our God with our whole heart and soul and mind and strength? And are we loving our neighbors as ourselves?

The prophets will remind us this summer and this fall that God calls us to live in this way.

It's not because God is vindictive or arbitrary or destructive. It's rather because God is loving, and wants us to live and act in loving ways ourselves.

And yes, the prophets do warn that God will sometimes act with tough love. But God's tough love is not because God is trying to be mean or vengeful or spiteful. It is, rather, that God calls us to live in love and align ourselves with his loving standards. That's the plumb line he's using to measure us.

And if we find ourselves out of alignment with God's ways, God always offers the opportunity to repent and return. God offers us the chance to realign ourselves, so that we may act more lovingly toward others.

God always offers us forgiveness.

God always offers us a chance to begin again.

God invites us to his table, to feed us, to change us, to shape and mold and fashion us from the inside out, into the people he created us to be.

And God does this out of love, so that we may be more loving.

Let's try to measure up.