

## **EXTREME MAKEOVER: WORLD EDITION**

### ***Out of Plumb and Not Up to Code***

A sermon offered by the Rev. Beth Holten  
November 28-29, 2009 • First Sunday of Advent  
Cross Creek Community Church, United Church of Christ  
Dayton, Ohio

#### **Amos 7:7**

*This is what he showed me:  
The Lord was standing by a wall that had been built true to plumb,  
with a plumb line in his hand.*

#### **Jeremiah 33:14-16**

*The days are surely coming, says the Lord,  
when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah.  
In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David;  
and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.  
In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety.  
And this is the name by which it will be called:  
“The Lord is our righteousness.”*

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When I think of building codes, I imagine huge books with lots of teeny, tiny printing, and frankly, I have to admit, my eyes kind of glaze over. Probably, at one time, the codes were written in such books; nowadays, though, they're stored and retrieved electronically. Do you know for how long societies have been using building codes? Any guesses? The oldest known building code was recoded in 1790 BCE—almost 4000 years ago! These building codes were part of the Code of Hammurabi in Babylon, written not electronically, nor even on paper contained in books, but chiseled onto stone. The building codes contained on this stone specified such things as:

- ❑ If a builder builds a house for someone, and does not construct it properly, and the house which he built falls in and kills its owner, then that builder shall be put to death;
- ❑ If it kills the son of the owner, the son of that builder should be put to death;
- ❑ If it kills a slave of the owner, then he shall pay, slave for slave, to the owner of the house;
- ❑ If it ruins goods, he shall make compensation for all that has been ruined, and inasmuch as he did not construct properly this house which he built and it fell, he should re-erect the house from his own means;
- ❑ If a builder builds a house for someone, even though he has not yet completed it, if the walls seem toppling, the builder must make the walls solid from his own means.

Building codes are sets of rules that specify the minimum acceptable level of safety for constructed buildings and other structures. The main purpose of the building codes is to protect the public health, safety and general welfare. Even 4000 years ago, we knew that it was pretty important to have sturdy, upright walls to hold up the building. In the Code of Hammurabi, it said if the walls seem toppling, they must be made solid, even if the builder has to re-do them out of his own money. One of the instruments used to determine whether the walls were sturdy and upright was a plumb line. A plumb line is a cord from which a metal weight is suspended that points directly to the earth's center of gravity. It's used to determine whether something is perfectly vertical, or upright. The plumb line provides the standard against which one can measure what one has built.

In the prophetic book of Amos, we hear about the plumb line—we hear how God uses the plumb line to measure the society that Amos and the people have built. God measures their society—God judges their society—to see if it is upright and just. God looks to see if their practice of religion is generating good works, Godly works, and right relationships with each other. In Amos' day, the people fail to measure up to God's standards of mercy and justice.

In the *Women's Bible Commentary*, biblical scholar Judith Sanderson writes that Amos' career as a prophet focused on two interrelated concerns: how wealthy the powerful people have become and the fact that they have amassed their wealth by exploiting the poor. The people had turned away from God's preferential option for the poor and from the understanding that the widows, the orphans and the sojourners, among others, are to be cared for as a matter of social justice.

In Amos 5:21, God cries out against the people: "I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies!" God sees that their religion has contributed to the moral, spiritual and ethical decline of the people. Instead of transforming the people into God's people, the religion of Amos' day was measured, and found lacking, because through the religion the people were taught to seek nothing but their own prosperity and the prosperity of the nation without concern for others. Sounds like shaky, wobbly walls to me.

What are we building today? Upright walls? There was an article in the *Dayton Daily News* this past week about an accident that occurred in Texas. A truck was overturned and the passengers were injured. This truck happened to be carrying passengers from Mexico and Guatemala who were entering the United States illegally, men mostly, but also women and children. They were families leaving their countries of origin because of the hopelessness of poverty in their countries; poverty, some of which is caused directly by the trading policies of our nation. They were families who came here through all sorts of dangers because there is absolutely no legal way for them to enter our country and do the jobs that we really don't want to do: work in meat slaughtering factories, pick vegetables in the incredible heat of the day, wash sheets and towels in the basements of our hotels; jobs from which the wealthy in our country benefit tremendously; jobs in which these undocumented laborers are exploited. So what was the response of the *DDN* readers to the tragedy of this accident? Hateful, mostly, things like they got what they deserved, they should just stay in the poverty of their own countries, etc, etc. There was not one voice from a person of faith responding with the call for immigration reform; not mine representing Greater Dayton Christian Connections, not anyone from our committee called Interfaith Group for Humane Immigration Reform. What did Martin Luther King, Jr., say, evil can reign when good people say nothing? How would God's plumb line be measuring our actions today?

In Amos' day, God could not overlook any longer the people's actions resulting in the rich getting richer from the exploitation of the poor and God destroyed the society that propped up those actions. Reform was no longer possible. God had to obliterate the structures that were creating these injustices.

When the TV show *Extreme Home Makeover* first began years ago, Ty and the team would go in and start from what was there and simply do a makeover, didn't they? But in the recent seasons, the first thing that the team does is to assess the current structure and judges it in almost every case to be better to demolish what is there and to build anew. They make this judgment that the current building is not capable of providing a healthy atmosphere for its residents—that the current structure in no way provides for the wholeness and dignity of its residents; that a little paint and patching is just not going to get it done; the whole thing must come down and a new design is put into place to support the health, safety and security of the family.

Now, the family has been living in this house, getting by, even though it is not providing the best results for the family members; but, nonetheless, it's theirs, it's what they know, it's home. They have to have a lot of trust to just abandon it, to let it be demolished and to trust that in a week's time the promise made by Ty will come true. It is a promise; a promise that the future will be better; that after demolition and destruction, a new home will be there, better than before after the shouts go out for "Move that bus!"

And that's what the prophet Jeremiah tells his people as they live in exile—after God has demolished their homes and deconstructed their society and their whole way of life. Jeremiah tells his people: God has made you a promise; a promise of a new city, of a new Jerusalem. This new city will be called "The Lord is our Righteousness." Righteous: the word comes from the Hebrew *tsedek*. This root word occurs in the Hebrew Bible over 500 times! Pretty important word, *tsedek*. *Tsedekah*, righteousness, is not an attribute that can be measured by the plumb line. *Tsedekah*, righteousness, is the personal integrity that

reflects the character of the God of Israel, a God full of compassion and mercy. *Tsedekah*, righteousness, is about the energy that radiates through individuals reflecting the character of God. What can be measured is the conduct, the actions, of one who is righteous, who lives in loving and just relationships with God, with all things and with all persons.

The World Health Organization of the United Nations has issued a new UNAIDS Outcome Framework for 2009-2011 containing nine priority areas. To enact these priority areas will require our righteousness, our living out of God's compassion and mercy. Listen and pray as I read these nine areas:

- We can reduce sexual transmission of HIV
- We can prevent mothers from dying and babies from becoming infected with HIV
- We can ensure that people living with HIV receive treatment
- We can prevent people living with HIV from dying of tuberculosis
- We can protect drug users from becoming infected with HIV
- We can remove punitive laws, practices, stigma and discrimination that block effective responses to AIDS
- We can stop violence against women and girls
- We can empower young people to protect themselves from HIV
- We can enhance social protection for people affected by HIV

God's promise through the prophet Jeremiah for us this Advent Season is that a radical new reality is possible for each of us and for our society. The days are surely coming, says the prophet, when God's future will be a reality: when faith communities stand up to the measure of God's plumb line because they are built upon God's righteousness and act in God's love, compassion and mercy. The days are surely coming, God promises, when all government systems, including immigration, will be just and will provide for the dignity and work of all persons. The days are surely coming, even though we still live in this time of waiting and anticipation, but the days are surely coming when the economics of the rich, people and nations, will not govern who receives medical treatment for HIV/AIDS, when all persons are deemed worthy of lives to be lived in health and wholeness, not dependant upon who they love, or the addictions with which they struggle, or their age or their gender; the days are surely coming! This is our hope! This is God's promise. Amen.