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~~I'm Not~~ I AM Sure About A God Who....

Amos 7:7-9 New Revised Standard Version This is what he showed me: the Lord was standing beside a wall built with a plumb line, with a plumb line in his hand. And the Lord said to me, "Amos, what do you see?" And I said, "A plumb line." Then the Lord said, "See, I am setting a plumb line in the midst of my people Israel; I will never again pass them by."

Romans 8:38 The Message I'm absolutely convinced that nothing - nothing living or dead, angelic or demonic, today or tomorrow, high or low, thinkable or unthinkable - absolutely nothing can get between us and God's love because of the way that Jesus our Master has embraced us.

Jude 1:20-25 The Message But you, dear friends, carefully build yourselves up in this most holy faith by praying in the Holy Spirit, staying right at the center of God's love, keeping your arms open and outstretched, ready for the mercy of our Master, Jesus Christ. This is the unending life, the real life! Go easy on those who hesitate in the faith. Go after those who take the wrong way. Be tender with sinners, but not soft on sin. The sin itself stinks to high heaven. And now to him who can keep you on your feet, standing tall in his bright presence, fresh and celebrating - to our one God, our only Savior, through Jesus Christ, our Master, be glory, majesty, strength, and rule before all time, and now, and to the end of all time. Yes.

This example is going to terribly date me, but those of us of a certain age will perhaps remember a movie starring Jack Nicholson, back when he was young but still just as creepy as he is now. The movie was called "Five Easy Pieces," and it's a dark, disturbing, and cynical film. I don't really recommend you look it up. There are lots of movies that over time become remembered for one scene in them or one line of dialogue. "When Harry Met Sally" has that squirmy scene in the restaurant. How many comics over the years have sought to parody "Casablanca"'s famous line, delivered by Humphrey Bogart with such coolness: "Here's looking at you kid." You may not be able to tell the plot of a single Clint Eastwood film, but I bet you know Eastwood's signature line: "Make my day!" The scene from "Five Easy Pieces" that is most remembered happens in a restaurant. The Jack Nicholson character simply wants an order of toast. The waitress tells him that they don't have toast. Nicholson's character points out that

they do have BLTs on the menu. The waitress could care less. Nicholson's character, getting frustrated, says, "if you can make a BLT on toast, then you can just bring me the toast." The waitress refuses again. Finally, Nicholson's character says, "Alright. Bring me a BLT on toast – hold the bacon, hold the lettuce, hold the tomato."

This summer's sermon series has been like that BLT Nicholson ordered – hold this, hold that, don't want this, can't stomach that. That is, we've been looking at the topic entitled "I'm Not Sure About A God Who..." and we have examined a number of things that get said about God that, like the bacon, lettuce, or tomato, some people don't want or can't abide on their theological sandwich. I've done this series to both address those skeptics of Christianity who think that Christians and their God are banal, bigoted, or boring, **and** to address **all** of us who have sometimes had those middle of the night questions about God (even if we worry that somehow we are not being faithful when those questions and doubts find us). But today I want to end this series by instead saying what I **AM** sure about God. It's good – in fact, it's essential – for you and I from time to time to try to say what it is that we do indeed believe about God, the things that we are indeed sure about. Of course it is good to do so while taking care that our sureness doesn't become smugness or self-righteousness or judgment of others who don't believe as we do. It is good to offer a statement of our humble understanding of who God is for us and why that has made all the difference in our lives. So that is what I am going to do this morning, oh-so-briefly, and tell you something of the things I am sure about God in the hopes that it might spark your own reflections and affirmations. And while, historically, the Disciples of Christ movement of which this church is a part hasn't really much emphasized the idea of the Trinity, I find my thoughts this morning indeed falling into what I am sure about in regards to God and Christ and Holy Spirit.

Throughout Christian history there has been a strong tradition of wanting to

maintain that God is indeed different, **extraordinarily** different, from human beings. Where human beings have the capacity to love but also the capacity to fail to love, God is always perfectly loving, perfectly caring. Where human beings can often only achieve an approximation of justice in this or that situation, God is understood to be the one who is **absolutely** just. And yet, can you understand how this sort of view can become oppressive? If God is **so** far away, **so** different from me, **so** utterly unlike me, how could I possibly know Him? How could such a One possibly care for me? How can I be worthy of such a God. When the writer of the hymn “Amazing Grace” spoke of himself as a “wretch,” or when Martin Luther, the founder of Protestantism, was weighed down by his sense of inadequacy, they were feeling the **weight** of that transcendence, that sense that God is *utterly* and completely **other**. That weight can make us feel inadequate. But the point of these words is not to make us feel inadequate. No, they ought to serve as a reminder to us never to never settle for where we find ourselves or to rest too easy in our efforts. You see, a God of perfect goodness and justice is one who never settles – as you or I sometimes do – for “good enough” or “it’ll do” when such settling means that there are still those who are hurting, or homeless, or helpless, or hungry, or hopeless. Such transcendence guards us against the temptation of prematurely blessing our imperfect social arrangements, our imperfect ways of dealing with both our friends and our enemies, and claiming that they are “good enough.” For God’s absolute, transcendent goodness reminds us that they are **not** good enough at all, and we are challenged to continue to seek to do better. In short, what I am sure about is that God is perfectly, utterly, always transcendently good and moral.

But I also know that God is with us, for us, and loves us through the person of Jesus Christ. To use the fancy theological word, if God is transcendent, then Jesus is **immanent** – which means, loosely put, right here with us, right here beside us, right

here showing care for us. It's the sense that animates that line from the hymn "In the Garden" that *"He walks with me and he talks with me, and He tells me I am his own."* It's the sense that animates the beautiful hymn *"On Eagles Wings"* that we sang last week, where the writer says *"[I] will hold you in the palm of my hand."* It's what is expressed when Jesus compares himself to a mother hen and wishes He could shield Jerusalem under his wings. For you see, even though the view and understanding of God as utterly transcendent can be our hope and inspiration, it can also sometimes leave us either despairing or simply in need of something warmer, if you will. You all no doubt are familiar with the famous, if now somewhat clichéd, story about the trail of two sets of footsteps in the sand that sometimes had only one set and Jesus saying, "My child, that is when I carried you." Cliché or not, it is a powerful image that expresses the fact that we know that not only is our God transcendentally perfect, worthy of our worship because of being unfailingly and only good, we also know that through our relationship to God's Son, we are met with the embodiment of that love, we are met with someone who knows what our life is like because he has lived the same messy mortal life as we do. And that, too, is something I am sure of.

On the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit came upon the believers and thousands were added to their ranks, and it was the beginning of their pushing into every corner of the world - within a century the Church would span from India to Spain, from Greece to Ethiopia. Lives were changed, female babies were rescued from the practice of infanticide, and hospitals for the poor were opened. And now it's our turn. For I am convinced – to name the final thing I am sure about – that the Holy Spirit was sent to us after Jesus' earthly departure to remind us that the task that Jesus started, the love of God that he embodied and proclaimed is now our job. But what is the Holy Spirit? "Spirit" talk can sound really airy and gaseous (pun intended) but I think there are two specific things that the Spirit does: It **haunts** us for what yet needs to be done and it

gifts us for doing so.

That the Spirit “haunts” us is a term I learned from my wife, the Rev. Barbara Blaisdell. And she uses an intriguing image for the work of God through the Holy Spirit in a recent sermon that she preached on the prophet Amos.¹ There are a variety of images for God – father, mother, friend, king – but the one Barbara points to is from Amos: the work of God through the Holy Spirit is like a “plumb line.” The prophet Amos lived 2700 years ago in a time when the society around him had become rife with injustice, where the rich hurt the poor, where the needy were not cared for. Yet they reveled in their religiosity, making a show of their piety while hurting the most vulnerable in their midst. Amos’ most famous words were these: *“I hate, I detest your feasts; I find no delight in your grand assemblies. I will not accept your... offerings of fatted beasts.... I refuse to listen to the clanging of your harps. Instead, let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like a perennial stream.”*

And then Amos offered that image of how God was to be at work and it is, I believe, an apt image for how the Spirit yet works among us. Let me share with you Barbara’s eloquent words here:

Finally, Amos shares yet another vision about a great stone edifice of a building, with mighty walls and huge pillars supporting its weight, a building with a plumb line... held up against it. ...[A] plumb line is a [construction] tool [that] employs the law of gravity to establish what is "plumb" (that is, what is exactly vertical, or true)... In a sense, the plumb line is the vertical equivalent of a level.... It's a simple tool, a weight tied to the end of a string. To use it you let it drop and every time it will show you whether the wallpaper you've hung is straight or the

¹Barbara goes into much more detail in the exegesis of Amos – and has an eloquent and compelling appeal to understand what the job of the modern-day prophet is in our own troubling and too often unjust times. It would be well worth your time to listen to the whole sermon, “God’s Gift of Purpose in Tough Times,” July 17, 2016, First Christian Church, Tacoma, Washington. http://podcast.fcctacoma.org/services/fccservices_20160717.mp3

wall you are building is true. Every time, no matter if you are standing on a hill or on flat ground, the plumb line will show you how to keep perfectly perpendicular or true. And if something is already constructed, if something is already supposed to be straight up and down... you can hold the plumb line up to it and tell if it is indeed true, straight up and down or...if something has gone crooked. That's the whole purpose of a plumb line, **to tell you whether things are still true or if something has gone crooked.**²

The prophet then recounts this word from God: "Then the Lord said, 'See, I am setting a plumb line in the midst of my people.'" The work of the Holy Spirit continues in your life and in my life because there are indeed things that have gone awry and wrong, that are leaning, that are out of kilter with what God wants. Maybe for you it's an addiction or a pattern of relating to others or a habit that is hurtful. In Amos' language, you're not plumb, you're out of kilter and the Holy Spirit wants to hold that plumb line up to you and help you stop leaning. And the Spirit won't stop haunting you until you can be put aright. Or maybe it is the world around you, as it was for Amos, that is out of kilter, leaning, gone crooked. For, again to quote Barbara,

Every society has... ideals that make that society what it is, ideals that keep that society in tact, that uphold its institutions. For the culture to which Amos was called, those ideals were to be found in the keeping of the law, the same law that was for everyone, and a law that no one was to be above. Justice for all, not just for a privileged few. But... Amos held the plumb line of that concept of equal justice for all and found his society woefully crooked.³

The Spirit of God is ever at work to haunt **us**, to hold that plumb line up to **us**, to ask **us** to discern where God's will for the hurting, the marginalized, the victims of unjust

²ibid., page 8. Emphasis mine.

³ibid., pp. 10-11.

systems have gotten out of kilter, off-plumb, from the ideals that animate us.

But I said there were two things about the Spirit: It doesn't just haunt us by holding that plumb line up to our lives and our society. The Spirit is not just some celestial Andy Rooney or Jerry Seinfeld or Lewis Black, good at kvetching and complaining but not much else. No, the Spirit offers gifts to address what is out of plumb, out of kilter. There are a variety of spiritual gifts mentioned in both Testaments. But not everybody gets all of them. But that's why we have each other; that's why we have the Church. **You** may not be gifted with the wisdom to see your way out of whatever is trapping you, hurting you, harming you, but someone in this room is. **You** may have the gift of what Paul called "prophesying" and therefore can see and name oh-so-clearly where society is out of kilter, out of plumb, and is giving in to fear and fecklessness in the face of demagoguery – but you may feel more like Wizard of Oz's Cowardly Lion in the face of acting against such things but someone in this room has what you need to help strengthen you in your resolve. No one in this room has the right to be judgmental of you. Only God has a right to judge. But together, as people inspired by the Holy Spirit, we can gently, lovingly teach one another how to better follow Jesus' gospel.

There is so much more that could be said to close out this sermon series on a note of affirmation instead of questioning. There are more than a few other things that I am indeed sure of about God. But that will have to do for now. Except for one final thing: You've heard me say it at funerals, you've heard me say that it is the Good News in a nutshell, you've heard me say that if I could take but one verse of the Bible to a desert island it would be this. The words are from Paul's letter to the Roman church: "...I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will ever be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." Nothing can

separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Nothing. Neither our deepest doubt nor our gravest pride, neither our deepest loss nor our highest joy, neither our most grievous failure nor greatest success. Nothing can ever separate us from the love of God.⁴

Of that ***I*** am sure too. Amen.

⁴For these four sentences, I am grateful to Dr. Robert L. Hill, Sr. Pastor Emeritus of Community Christian Church, Kansas City, Missouri. Personal correspondence.