

Dear friends in Christ



St. Francis Episcopal Mission Outreach

Rev. Dr. John C. Forney
Pentecost 7, July 11

“Plumb-Line Theology”

Amos 7:7-15; Psalm 85:8-13;
Ephesians 1:3-14; Mark 6:14-29

This past week Donald Rumsfeld passed. Not many of us in the peace action community will be shedding any tears. Andrew Bacevich, formal colonel of the Vietnam War who now realizes the folly of that endeavor, believes our military adventures into Afghanistan and Iraq were the two major blunders ever of American foreign policy.

With his promotion of torture as an instrument of this policy, Rumsfeld deeply stained any reservoir of international goodwill that had accumulated after 9/11. I’m certainly not going to take issue with the headline announcing his demise, “War Criminal Found Dead at 88.”

Amos gives us true and sure guidance in judging the policies of nations as well the authors of such policies – the Plumb Line.

I have always found in my work as a general contractor that the plumb line never lies. Back in my days when a college student my parents built

a new home in Signal Hill. We had rented an apartment building just down the hill from the site of what would be our new home. Every afternoon, after my father returned from work, he would hike up the hill to inspect the efforts of the framers.

One afternoon I had gone up with him. I was wandering around on the first floor when I heard him call out, "John, come up here." There on the second floor by what would be my parents' bedroom I saw what had so alarmed him. The framed in wall of two by fours had to be easily five to ten degrees out of plumb. Scattered around the floor was the cause. Apparently, the plumb line the builders had used that day was brewed by Budweiser – a good number of empties lay scattered around the floor by the tilting wall.

In my later days I often used a level. But I eventually hung a plumb line from the top plate just to make sure. There was the true measure: no lies, no B.S.

The duplicity of "weapons of mass destruction" that was used to sell this war to a hyperventilating public bent on revenge was no Plumb Line. The torture authorized by G. W. Bush, Rice, Rumsfeld and a compliant CIA that jiggered the evidence was no Plumb Line of truth. These stats had been bought and sold, traded like junk bonds on Wall Street. The gullible public that never questioned anything? Well, you get the picture. There was enough deception and complicity to go around.

In the folly of these forever wars, our government delivered up our troops like Herod did the head of John the Baptist on a platter. Just to satisfy his own ego and please the desires of a lascivious crowd of revelers. "Mission Accomplished."

The reason that much of the psalmist's writings appeal to me is due to the inherent wisdom they contain. They draw from the same wisdom tradition as the book of proverbs. To paraphrase President G. W Bush, "Actions have consequences," just like elections.

Psalm 1 is my favorite from this tradition: "Blessed is the man (woman) who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of the scoffers, but his/her delight is in the law

of the Lord, and on his law s/he meditates day and night. S/he is like a tree planted by streams of water, that yields its fruit in its season....”

One reason I gravitated to it was that it was an assignment in Hebrew class – to memorize it in Hebrew. As I have such a bad memory for poetry and the rest, that I can still remember the first lines...well I feel like that boy who stuck his thumb in the pie and pulled out a plum.

But I digress. The theology behind this wisdom tradition in the psalms is also that of Amos’s Plumb Line. Truth is truth. Actions have consequences. And Count Otto von Bismarck, known for his quip, “God has a special providence for fools, drunkards, and the United States of America” – we shouldn’t put God to the test. We ought not to count on God being a magic fairy godmother rescuing us from folly. God’s judgment is a Plumb Line. Not a helicopter mom to preserve us Americans from self-inflicted wounds.

The list of our unforced errors would seem endless, as of late.

The theology behind the wisdom tradition of the Psalms, Proverbs, Job - is that we have agency. We can choose for good or ill. That is God’s primal gift to our humanity. It doesn’t depend on the Snake. “Thoughts and prayers” are not magic charms.

In Harry Potter, J.K. Rowling clearly speaks to moral choice. Albus Dumbledore, headmaster of Hogwarts, advises his dejected young student, “It is our choices that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities.”¹ Plumb Line theology straight out of Amos.

It’s timely to mention our disastrous response to COVID-19. Perhaps that German count is right about Americans standing in special need of divine providence. We have about the worst record of any nation on God’s green earth in our handling of this health catastrophe. Six hundred thousand dead and counting. More than the combined American casualties of both WWI and WWII.

¹ J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* (Cincinnati, OH: Scholastic Books, 1999), 333.

However, don't get me started on past malfeasance. I want us to move forward. I want us to consider our choices in the days and weeks ahead as we must now cope with a new variant of the disease, variant delta.

It's more contagious and more lethal. One doctor on the news this week said that of all his patients in the hospital, 99 percent of them have one thing in common. They didn't take the vaccine. This past week alone, somewhere around ten thousand Americans died from COVID-19. Most all of them needn't have done so. Had they acted with prudence and got the shot.

Those who counsel hesitancy do so out of ignorance or fear. Do not heed their advice. Turn off Fox News. Turn off that ignorant neighbor. Is he an epidemiologist? A student of virology? Unlikely.

Science is God's Plumb Line here. Its acceptance is the separation between the foolish sitting in the scoffer's seat and the righteous woman planted by an ever-flowing Stream of Life. She will still be alive most likely. Not so that one who refused the shot, coughing up his lungs, whose heart is compromised and his shrunken brain is addled. This disease is an equal opportunity scourge. It attacks all organ systems including the tendency to shrink one's brain.

Tell your friends to get their shot. Drive them to Walgreens or wherever. Get your family vaccinated. As the psalmist, as a former president would say, "Don't do stupid [stuff]." Get the jab. We need all our grey matter.

"I will listen to what the Lord God is saying, for he is speaking peace to this faithful people and to those who turn their hearts to him." God sends guides along the way as bearers of this word of salvation. Listen to them. Listen to those to whom God has given knowledge. Listen to Dr. Fauci, Dr. Sanjay Gupta, Dr. Nahid Bhadelia. They are today's messengers of Gracious Providence. Tell your friends to listen that they might "live long and prosper."

This from a frontline medic, Dr. Zijian Chen: "Hundreds of patients, most of them women, showed up soon after the center's doors opened. To

the doctors' surprise, however, many of them had experienced only mild cases of Covid-19. They hadn't been hospitalized. They were relatively young and otherwise in good health, without the underlying conditions like obesity and diabetes that are known to make Covid-19 worse. And yet, months after their bodies had seemingly fought off the coronavirus, they still felt quite ill."²

These patients had been felled with what professionals now call "long covid" or "Covid long-haulers." They struggle with a "hodgepodge of symptoms, including fatigue, pain, shortness of breath, light sensitivity, exercise intolerance, insomnia, hearts that race inexplicably, diarrhea and cramping, memory problems and a debilitating "brain fog" that can at times make it hard to put a cogent sentence together."³ These are some of the consequences likely to follow survivors all their remaining days.

It is indeed tragic that many, through no fault of their own, bear the burden of our unpreparedness -- though wearing masks and social distancing would have made a difference. But now with an effective vaccine at hand, there is no excuse. Science is our Plumb Line, not fear and ignorance. Plumb Line theology is Light and Life. Literally!

When we lose a righteous one to the foolishness or wanton depravity of others, I find it especially tragic. The juxtaposition of such evil acts with righteous makes it all the more painful.

This week, also in the news, was the story of such a righteous man, José Mejía, an immigrant from San Salvador fleeing a brutal civil war. José was only 17 when he began his trip through Mexico.⁴ There, he told of ending up "assaulted, robbed and left ... with nothing." He was

² Moises Velasquez-Manoff, "What if you Never Get Better," *The New York Times*, January 21, 2021, updated January 26.

² Ibid.

⁴ Brittney Mejía, "A Legend Who Became a Janitor Meets a Tragic End," *Los Angeles Times*, July 3, 2021.

reduced to sleeping on a bench in a park until someone came along and offered him a job on a construction site.

Eventually, he made it to Los Angeles and was able to let his family know that he was still alive. He found a job at as a janitor at a Toyota dealership. He was able to send enough money back home to El Salvador that his family was able to move into a new home.

José eventually found a position as janitor at Park La Brea apartment complex in Torrance. There, as a janitor, he became a familiar face, "... known and trusted by tenants and admired by coworkers...where he made \$17 an hour. He spent lunch breaks helping negotiate a new contract for himself and fellow workers. When a car drove into a crowd of people during an immigrant rights rally in Orange County, Mejia jumped on the hood in an attempt to stop it."

He saw the realization of a long-held dream. At fifty, he bought his very own first house.

He put in decades with his union, "paying it forward." "He was walking the walk on the change he wanted to see in the world and put a lot of his life into helping others," reported the secretary treasurer of the SEIU, Alejandra Valles.

Those who knew him never expected that his life would be tragically ended on the fifth floor of that building by a knife-wielding assailant no older than he had been when he fled El Salvador.

That morning José had told his wife Molina to take the bus to the market and he would pick her up after work and drive her home. At 4:00 p.m. she headed to the store. There she waited for him.

"Where are you?' she texted him. 'Why aren't you answering?'"⁵

"When Mejía's cousin called and told her he would pick her up, she left the market sobbing. She thought Mejia had been in an accident."

"I never thought it'd be something like this," Molina said. 'He didn't deserve this.'"

⁵ Ibid.

Mejía was God's Plumb Line – a life lived with integrity; a life lived for others. He was the Gospel in flesh and blood. These many, many “essential workers” like Mejía, who toil anonymously are what make our country work.

Living decent lives of integrity, they are the soul of this nation. Mejía and his family -- those who clean our office buildings after we have gone home, those who work eight, ten hours a day, bent over picking our food. Those who stock the shelves and pick up the garbage. Orderlies walking the hallways of our hospitals – they have a place in the Heart of God. A Plumb Line straight and true. These are the “little Christs” in our midst. And woe to those fancy, too self-important politicians who forget this. You are not what this country is about. It's about Mejía and his compadres. Amen.