

Sermon for September 28, 2014 – Pentecost 16

Ezekiel 33:7-11

Theme: **You are a watchman.**

- 1) *Understand your duty.*
- 2) *Understand your message.*

⁷ "Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel; so hear the word I speak and give them warning from me. ⁸ When I say to the wicked, 'O wicked man, you will surely die,' and you do not speak out to dissuade him from his ways, that wicked man will die for his sin, and I will hold you accountable for his blood. ⁹ But if you do warn the wicked man to turn from his ways and he does not do so, he will die for his sin, but you will have saved yourself. ¹⁰ "Son of man, say to the house of Israel, 'This is what you are saying: "Our offenses and sins weigh us down, and we are wasting away because of them. How then can we live?" ' ¹¹ Say to them, 'As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Turn! Turn from your evil ways! Why will you die, O house of Israel?'

Imagine being a meteorologist and having the responsibility of warning people of severe weather. That would be a tough and thankless job. Why? Because people don't seem to listen to weather warnings. They try to "ride out" hurricanes, drive through blizzards, or do laborious work in extreme heat. On top of this, if a storm peters out before reaching a town, people will get mad at you for making a false prediction.

So what should meteorologists do? Should they simply ignore the signs of a severe storm because the threat may not actually be as bad as it seems? Should they only tell people what they want to hear? Would it really be the weatherman's fault if a person gets hurt in a storm because he chose not to sound the alarm?

I think it is safe to say that none of us would want a "fair weather" meteorologist. We want to be warned of danger. We want to be safe.

Brothers and sisters in Christ: God has made us all watchmen in his kingdom. No, we are not watching for hurricanes and tornados. We are watching out for a much greater threat, one that kills the soul eternally: unrepented sin.

The world does not like talking about sin. "Stop trying to make me feel guilty and telling me how to live my life. I don't believe that God would punish me for things that society accepts. Stop trying to scare me into your religion."

It's hard being a watchman, when people don't want to listen. So what should we do? Only tell them the good news about God and avoid the bad news about our sin? Should we just stop warning people altogether?

Let us learn what to do by listening to the command that God gave to Ezekiel, under the theme: **You are a watchman.** 1) *Understand your duty.* 2) *Understand your message.*

Part One: Understand Your Duty

Our text begins with the LORD commanding Ezekiel: ⁷ *"Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel; so hear the word I speak and give them warning from me.*

What was Ezekiel's duty as Israel's watchman? I will tell you what it wasn't. His duty was not to assess God's warnings and decide whether or not they were serious enough to pass on. His job was not to "sweeten" God's word so that people would find it more palatable.

Ezekiel's duty was simple: Listen and tell them everything I tell you.

As God called Ezekiel, so the LORD has also called us to be His representatives in the world. St. Paul writes: *We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us.*ⁱ What appeal does God want to make through us? St. Paul continues: *We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God.*ⁱⁱ As the last verse of our text so clearly indicates: God takes no pleasure in the death of anyone. He *wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.*ⁱⁱⁱ He wants all people to repent and live. This is why he calls us to be his watchmen.

But how are we to accomplish our duty? The same way God told Ezekiel: just listen and speak.

We hear God speak in his Word. God wants us to take the opportunities he gives us to study the Bible on our own (through private devotions) and together in Bible class and worship. And after taking the time to listen to Him, the Lord wants us to speak – simply telling our family, friends and neighbors the truths we learned from Scripture.

It is not your duty to coerce or entice people to believe. God doesn't want you to cut out the parts of His word that you find hard or "offensive". He simply wants you to listen and speak – warning people of sin, and pointing them to their Savior.

"But," someone might say, "This is hard to do. Joe is my lifelong buddy – closer than a brother to me. We used to get into all sorts of trouble together. How can I tell him that he shouldn't be living with his long-time girlfriend? They are probably going to get married anyway. I tried to talk to him once before, but he just got mad and told me never to mention it again - that if he wanted to get some religion, he'd call the pastor and talk to someone who wasn't so hypocritical. That hurt. Maybe I should just let Joe be. It's ultimately between him and God, right?"

Listen to what the LORD says: ⁸ *When I say to the wicked, 'O wicked man, you will surely die,' and you do not speak out to dissuade him from his ways, that wicked man will die for his sin, and I will hold you accountable for his blood.*

Did you catch that? If you fail to warn someone about their sin, God will hold you accountable. "But," you might think, "that seems so unfair! Why should I be held accountable for what other people do? Joe's an adult and should be able to figure these things out on his own."

Think of it this way: Imagine that a meteorologist sees a devastating tornado approaching a town, but chooses not to sound the alarm because he feels people should be able to figure it out on their own. The storm strikes and people die. Don't you think the meteorologist should be held accountable for not doing his job of sounding the alarm? If this is true in earthly matters, how much more true are they in spiritual matters!

Telling someone they are going to go to hell if they continue in their sin is not a popular message; but it is one that needs to be said. Why? So that a person might see the seriousness of his sins and repent.

⁹ *But if you do warn the wicked man to turn from his ways and he does not do so, he will die for his sin, but you will have saved yourself.*

No one can blame the National Weather Service if people die because they chose to ignore the evacuation warnings the NWS issues and try to ride out a hurricane. The same holds true for us.

It is not our job to make people repent. Our job is simple to warn and point to Jesus for refuge. It is not our fault if people choose not to take our warning seriously – although the devil may make us feel this way. Our responsibility is simply to lovingly inform them of the truth. They themselves are responsible for what they do with that information.

When I reflect on how I have fulfilled my duty as a watchman, I must confess my sins and seek the Lord's forgiveness. I have failed many times. Haven't we all?

It is true that God does not want us to be like hypocrites who just go around telling people that they are sinners, sinners, sinners. But He does want us to lovingly talk to people who are caught in sin and do not seem to realize it. I understand how hard it is to do this, because I also don't want to offend people! We all like to be liked and live in peace with each other. I also realize how easy it is to use the excuse: "they should know better. It is their responsibility, not mine." But such reasoning is wrong. We sound like Cain, who once tried to hide his sin by asking: "*Am I my brother's keeper.*"^{iv} Yes, I am my brother's keeper, and so are you. Every Christian is.

Let us then repent of our dereliction of duty and ask the Lord for forgiveness. And do you know what happens when we do this? The LORD forgives us for Jesus sake. All our transgression was placed on Jesus – including our failures to warn - and the LORD held him accountable for our sin. Jesus died. He also rose again to show that our sins are indeed forgiven, which should lead us to pray:

"Dearest Jesus, I thank you for forgiving my sin of failing to warn those caught in unrepentant sin. Help me be the kind of watchman you want me to be. Help me understand my duty and carry it out faithfully: leading lost souls to you for forgiveness."

Now that we understand what our duty as watchmen are, let us understand our message.

Part Two: Understand your message.

When the LORD threatens to kill the wicked, it is not because he takes pleasure in their death. No. The reason he threatens is so that people might see the seriousness of their situation - so they can repent and live.

Now there are usually two classes of unrepentant sinners: Those who feel that all is ok and that they don't have to worry about their sin. They have no qualms of conscience. To these people the law must be preached in all its severity.

The other class of unrepentant sinner is the person who feels so loaded down by guilt, that he thinks God could never forgive him. This is the type of person the LORD refers to when He says; ¹⁰ "*Son of man, say to the house of Israel, 'This is what you are saying: "Our offenses and sins weigh us down, and we are wasting away because of them. How then can we live?"*"

I have met many people who feel this way – people who have never heard the Gospel. They feel so burdened with guilt that they think God could never forgive them. What should we say to such people: Do you tell them: “You will surely die?”

Absolutely not! God told Ezekiel: “*Say to them, 'As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Turn! Turn from your evil ways! Why will you die, O house of Israel?'*”

In other words, God wants us to tell people about his mercy, grace and forgiveness. He wants them to be saved. Tell people who are in despair because of their guilt that Jesus died for them. All sin has been paid for in full; Jesus’ resurrection proves it. Show them how God promises to adopt them as his dearly loved children through baptism. God hates seeing sinners punished. He wants them to live. With Jesus’ forgiveness and help, they can give up their despair and their sin. They don’t have to die.

Being a watchman for Christ is a tough job. We have an unpopular warning to sound. Nobody likes hearing that they are wicked and sinful, but they need to know this so that they might repent and receive Jesus’ forgiveness with open arms.

The motivation our text gives us for being faithful watchmen is: not being held accountable for the damnation of others if we fail to warn. But the Scriptures also offer us another reason to be faithful in our duties. St. James writes: *My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring him back, remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins.*^v

Wow, what a great reason to be a faithful watchman! Let us, then, ask the Lord to help us be faithful watchmen, understanding both the importance of our duty, and the message we proclaim. Amen.

ⁱ 2 Corinthians 5:20a, NIV84

ⁱⁱ 2 Corinthians 5:20b, NIV84

ⁱⁱⁱ 1 Timothy 2:4, NIV84

^{iv} Genesis 4:9, NIV84

^v James 5:19,20, NIV84