

Watches and Warnings

Ezekiel 33:7-9 (NASB)

Now as for you, son of man, I have appointed you a watchman for the house of Israel; so you will hear a message from My mouth, and give them warning from Me. When I say to the wicked, “O wicked man, you shall surely die,” and you do not speak to warn the wicked from his way, that wicked man shall die in his iniquity, but his blood I will require from your hand. But if you on your part warn a wicked man to turn from his way, and he does not turn from his way, he will die in his iniquity; but you have delivered your life.

Grace, mercy, and peace be multiplied in abundance upon you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

The leading weather authority on the evening news informs the viewers that a red flag warning is in effect for the region in which you live. What does that mean for you? It means that conditions are optimal for a wildfire to crop up where you live...and often at an hour you do not expect. Such was the case earlier this week near Jordan and in the Musselshell regions of Montana. The warning alerts you to keep an eye to the sky, but also to be very careful about how you go about your day to day business. Your carelessness impacts your own livelihood to be sure, but it also has bearing on others in and around your community. Red flag warnings are issued to make everyone aware that actions carry with them consequences. Likewise, watches for severe weather are helpful in that they allow us to make preparations before the event actually occurs. So, you can see, that these watches and warnings are not issued in vain, but in fact, are for your own good and the good of your neighbor.

The good of the neighbor is what's at stake for Ezekiel. This appointed watchman for the house of Israel is tasked with a very difficult and unpopular mandate. Like the weather authority, his job is to alert Israel of impending disaster. The difference is that this storm will not merely cause damage to property and goods. This storm reserved for the wicked will bring certain death. Ezekiel's watches and warnings take us a step beyond what's going on with the weather to something going on inside the heart and soul of mankind. At the heart of the matter is the wickedness of Ezekiel's hearers. The root of the problem is that transgressions and sins, a way of life in opposition to God's way, require blood on someone's hands. Sin and blood go together like peanut butter and jelly. You sin—you die. That's what it means to be a member of the house of Israel. In that house there is blood required, and death as the consequence for trespasses. So the wicked are smack dab in the bull's eye of the storm of God's wrath. Whether the watches and warnings are heard and heeded or not, the wicked within Israel's house don't have a prayer. (Or perhaps with Ezekiel on duty they do have a prayer after all.) They may carry on as if the skies are blue and

Mr. Bluebird is on my shoulder, but in all reality the sky is surely falling. God requires the forfeiture of life at the hand of the wicked. Wickedness has no part of God's kingdom and must be eradicated from the face of the earth. Furthermore, don't begin to think that God owes you any explanation or must necessarily provide you with any mercy whatsoever. Your sin is entirely your doing, and you can't excuse yourself from it any more than a leopard can change its spots. The Word of God is not yours to fudge with or finagle to justify your wicked cause. The blood exacted against the sin you commit is required of you whether you believe or not. So it's all on you! I didn't make the rules of the house. I only live there as a blood relative. And the same is true for you.

Even though the Lord does not owe us any good word because we daily sin much and are in need of forgiveness, He not only chooses to speak to sinners but He does so through the lips of His prophet. Watches and warnings are means God uses to get our attention and turn us around. Ezekiel is not only to be concerned about his own blood, but now he's appointed a watchman for other peoples' blood too. His mission is to speak a warning to his neighbors living in the house. When God gives him a message, he is obligated to speak it.

But suppose the message is not well received? Suppose the wicked in their wickedness are not inclined to give him the time of day? What then? The prophet, and those who follow in his footsteps through the ages, is in a unique and awkward predicament. As watchman, he must do as he is commanded. If it all goes well for the prophet and his hearers, the work of repentance bears forth an abundant harvest of new life and fruitfulness. We rejoice when sinners make confession and are absolved of their sins. Jesus says, "There will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents, than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance" (Luke 15:7). The watchman will rejoice too because the act of one man's repentance will spare the prophet from blood on his hands. "You will have delivered your life," the Lord declares (verse 9). That's good news all around!

As for the obstinate who are warned of the watchman but ignore it out of hand, death will be their undoing. Blood will be required, but it don't be exacted from the prophet's veins. The wicked make their own bed and sleep in it. On the other hand, if the warning fails to go out because the prophet prefers to be tight-lipped, then both preacher and hearer are doomed. Blood will flow as blood is required from both hands.

Ezekiel serves as our spiritual weatherman. The watches and warnings he issues are a clarion call to wake up from sinful slumber and turn about. Repentance is in fact a 180 degree turn from wickedness and destruction to life and restoration. Modern day watchmen are tasked with the same call to duty as that of the prophets and apostles. Pastors are given the Church to turn people about when they preach from the housetops: "Repent! For the kingdom of heaven is at hand!" They know that whether or not they speak up and say something determines whether or not blood will be required at their hands. Therefore, pastors are burdened with a greater accountability than the average Joe. Paul calls them "stewards of the mysteries of God" (I Corinthians 4:1). What does that all mean for you? Simply this: Just as the civil authorities are ordained by God as His servants who do not bear the sword in vain (Romans 13:4), so your pastor is ordained by the same Lord and God to bear the sword of the Law in your midst. He does not wield it in vain, but comes prepared to unsheath it against the wicked. "For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out

God's wrath on the wrongdoer," Paul says. "Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience" (Romans 13:4b-5).

This charge to watch and warn in Ezekiel is also given and charged to Jesus' disciples in the Gospel lesson for the day. Jesus says, "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother" (Matthew 18:15). Refusing to listen ends in catastrophe for the unrepentant brother even as the wicked in Ezekiel are subjected to death. Jesus tells us to treat these reprobate as Gentiles and tax collectors. Such are outside the kingdom and stubbornly excommunicate themselves from the fellowship of forgiveness. Pastors play a vital role in this judgment even though they themselves are sinners and stand in need of repentance as well. Jesus is not kidding around when He vests the apostles with the Office of the Keys (an office conferred upon pastors in our modern day). This is what He says: "Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (Matthew 18:18). Once again, you see the severity with which pastors are judged. As stewards of God's mysteries, they have a grave responsibility to turn the wicked from his evil way and live. Life is always the goal with church discipline. The binding key withholds forgiveness while the loosing key grants it. Both belong to the Church, but the pastor is the appointed means through which the Keys are exercised.

At such a serious point in the sermon as this, the preacher is enticed to provide some comic relief by way of a story. Stories provide us with illustrations of the point the preacher is trying to make, but as of yet has failed to deliver. Years of service in the Office of the Public Ministry afford varied and assorted examples of the Office of the Keys at work among the saints. Instead of a story, I would commend to you a piece of pastoral advice from a sainted veteran of the cross in a book he wrote. "Whoever will be great among you, shall be your minister" (Mark 10:43). Jesus made authority in the fellowship dependent upon brotherly service. Genuine spiritual authority is to be found only where the ministry of hearing, helping, bearing, and proclaiming is carried out. Every cult of personality that emphasizes the distinguished qualities, virtues, and talents of another person, even though these be of an altogether spiritual nature, is worldly and has no place in the Christian community; indeed, it poisons the Christian community...In the man himself there is nothing to admire...The Church does not need brilliant personalities but faithful servants of Jesus and the brethren. Not in the former but in the latter is the lack. The Church will place its confidence only in the simple servant of the Word of Jesus Christ because it knows that then it will be guided, not according to human wisdom and human conceit, but by the Word of the Good Shepherd" (*Life Together, Bonhoeffer, pgs. 108-109*).

With a series of watches and warnings from the mouth of the watchman, the house of Israel now has hope of deliverance. God has provided a way out of sin and death if only the people will listen. Blood is required at the hand of the wicked to be sure, but also at the hand of the watchman if he does not blow the trumpet in Zion. God has blown His trumpet in Zion. "He has raised up for us a mighty Savior, born of the house of His servant David. Through His holy prophets He promised of old that He would save us from our enemies, from the hands of all who hate us" (Benedictus). Jesus, the innocent One, allowed His holy hands to be bloodied with your sin and mine. God the Father required of His Son the blood He required of you by nailing Him to the tree. Then God raised Jesus from the dead,

assuring us that sin is forgiven and life is freely given. For where there is forgiveness of sins, there also is life and salvation. Since you are forgiven, death no longer has dominion over you. It cannot dominate. Jesus has unsheathed His sword and slain it in His death on the cross for you. His blood was given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins. Therefore, you are “free to worship Him without fear, holy and righteous in His sight all the days of your life” (Benedictus).

With our eyes to the skies, and having been made aware of red flag warnings, we remain watchful and vigilant of danger. Listening to the weather and taking proper precautions, you and I hope to be delivered from danger not only for ourselves but also the neighbor. Living together in community, our Lord Jesus cares for us through the lips of His watchmen. For them we give thanks and praise in Jesus’ name. Amen.