February 28, 2016
Lent 3
Text: Ezekiel 33:7-11

7 “So you, son of man, I have made a watchman for the house of Israel. Whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me. 8 If I say to the wicked, O wicked one, you shall surely die, and you do not speak to warn the wicked to turn from his way, that wicked person shall die in his iniquity, but his blood I will require at your hand. 9 But if you warn the wicked to turn from his way, and he does not turn from his way, that person shall die in his iniquity, but you will have delivered your soul.

10 “And you, son of man, say to the house of Israel, Thus have you said: ‘Surely our transgressions and our sins are upon us, and we rot away because of them. How then can we live?’” Say to them, As I live, declares the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways, for why will you die, O house of Israel? (ESV)

To Warn or Not to Warn

To warn or not to warn? If that is the question, then the answer of our text is to warn. In ancient Israel, the watchman stood high atop the city walls. If he saw the enemy coming he was to warn the people by blowing the trumpet. The trumpet was a call to prepare themselves for battle. People in the fields would run for safety inside the fortified walls of the city.

If any man disregarded the watchman’s warning, he would be one of the first to be cut down by the advancing army. If, however, the watchman did not sound the warning, he himself would be held responsible for the deaths of the people.

Today, we live in a culture full of watchmen. Watchmen warn us when hurricanes and tornadoes approach. They warn us about coming storms and flashfloods. They warn us when prisoners escape, when pedophiles and rapists live in our neighborhoods, and when terrorist activity is suspected.

But there are no alerts when sin puts us in danger of spiritual and eternal death? Our world issues no Amber alerts when parents do not baptize their children. It sounds no warning when Christians wander away from the Word and Sacraments and, thus, put themselves in danger of circling the drain that empties into hell. Sirens do not sound when we consume pornography or have casual sex-play outside of marriage. Liberal churches post no signs that say “poison doctrines preached here.”

In our text, God calls the prophet Ezekiel to be a spiritual watchman, one who would rebuke the people’s sins. If they did not repent after hearing his warning, no blame would fall on Ezekiel’s head. If, however, he did not rebuke their sins, he would be held accountable for the people’s damnation!

Ezekiel was the watchman for the people of his day. The pastor is the watchman for God’s people today. He is to call you to repentance. The trumpet he sounds is the Word of the living God, i.e., the Word from God’s own mouth. And if you don’t heed that Word—if you do not repent—then the sword that comes to cut you down is the LORD God himself. Indeed, the
LORD says, “Is not my word like fire and like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces?”

This is the situation in which pastor and people live every day. And I face the same danger as you do. You see, if I call you to repentance, I am also calling myself to do the same. If I do not warn you to flee from the prevailing sins of our day, then the Lord will hold me accountable for your soul’s death--as though I had killed you with my own hands. And the Lord will give me what a murderer deserves.

- You may not want me to point out your sins, or even to bring them up.
- You may not consider it polite for me to tell you that you have sinned.
- You may become angry.
- You may hate me if I do.

But I ... I will be damned if I don’t! And I’m not willing to take that chance. So if I warn you of your sins even when you would rather not hear it, please remember that I am under the same death sentence as you are.

To warn or not to warn? In my office as pastor, I must warn. I must denounce your sins … your cruel words, your worry, your quick temper, your gossiping tongue, and your fault-finding ways. But you will say to yourselves, “I may sin, but they’re not that bad.” But I say to you, “An impenitent Christian is no Christian! And the Lord says to the impenitent what he first said to ancient Israel in our text, “Turn back, turn back from your evil ways, for why will you die, O house of Israel?” (Ezekiel 33:11).

Has God’s Word done it’s work in you? Are you scared because of your sins? Does your conscience burn? Has fear leaped up into your throat? If so, the Law has done its proper work in your heart. If so, your pastor must preach to you the Gospel.

So hear the good news: To turn from your sins and trust in Christ is to have the forgiveness of sins. St. John says, “We have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.” And St. Paul says, “But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ.” And Jesus says, “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life.” (John 3:36).

God does not want anyone to die in his sins. To the house of Israel, He says,

“As I live,” declares the Lord GOD, “I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live.”

The LORD says to Ezekiel, “You are my prophet. What do you see on yonder horizon?” “I see a man,” he says. “Yes,” declares the LORD. “He is man—but he is more than a man. He is also God. He is your Messiah. His name is Jesus. And he wears a robe dipped in blood.”

Beloved, Jesus is an army of one who has already won. He has won the battle against sin,
death, and damnation. He speaks from a cross. “It is finished.”⁷ he says. “By my suffering and dying, I have triumphed over all evil. And by my rising again I am here to say, ‘Trust in me and you shall live spiritually and everlastingly.’”

So the Almighty God says to all his pastors, “Watchmen, tell sinners the Gospel.

- Tell them that my Son is the only way to heaven.
- Tell them of his Incarnation.
- Tell them of his perfect obedience.
- Tell them that, on the cross, I laid upon him the iniquity of them all.
- Tell them that he completed the work of their salvation, for he said, “Tetelestai.” i.e., “It is finished.”

“And watchman, tell them that his tomb is empty. Tell them that he rose from the dead and showed himself alive to over 500 eyewitnesses before he ascended into heaven.”⁸

“And tell them of my Son’s promises, especially this one: “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live. And whoever lives and believes in me shall never die.”⁹ Yes, tell them, watchman! Tell it straight! And tell it true!

To warn or not to warn? You may remember that Cain murdered his own brother, Abel. Almost immediately, God asked Cain a pointed question. He said to him, “Where is Abel your brother?” And Cain said, “I do not know. Am I my brother’s keeper?” And the LORD said, to him, “What have you done? The voice of your brother’s blood is crying to me from the ground.”¹⁰

We are all called to be our brother’s keeper. We are all to be watchmen. Pastors do so publicly. The Christian does so person-to-person in his various callings or vocations.

To warn or not to warn? Answer: To warn! I can almost read your thoughts. You may say, “Who am I, to criticize a fellow believer?” But I say to you, “In matters of sin, we are not called to be nice. We must grow a backbone. Warn him lovingly if you see him playing with fire. Care enough to speak the truth in love and to care enough to warn him lest he become addicted to a life of sin.

This is not the hypocritical judging forbidden by Jesus, but the loving rebuke commanded by him.¹¹ Would you not warn me to get out of my house if it’s on fire? Of course you would! How much more if I’m on fire by unrepentant sin!

It’s not easy to be a faithful watchman, is it? Not as a pastor; not as a Christian; not if you are the prophet Ezekiel. When God called Ezekiel to be a watchman, he gave him the name “son of man.” In so doing, he wanted his prophet to remember that he was only a man, a sinful man, but one who would serve his fellowman.

About 600 years later, Jesus came on the scene. He also called himself the “Son of Man.”¹² Jesus was--and still is--God and man in one person.
This sinless “Son of Man” was different from Ezekiel. Ezekiel warned people of their sins. But Jesus died to pay for all of their sins. Ezekiel was sinful and died because he was a sinner. But Jesus was perfect and died to give sinners eternal life. Ezekiel’s remains have turned to dust in his grave. But Jesus has no remains, for he rose from the dead, ascended into heaven, and now sits on the right hand of God, the Father almighty.

And he is coming back, isn’t he” He’s coming back to receive you to himself. You trust in him alone, do you not? Then you are children of the heavenly Father. And Jesus says to you, “Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life.”

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Yes, he gives you eternal life. Rest your hearts and souls in his promise, for he always keeps his promises!

In the name of Jesus: Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!

Endnotes

1When I refer to “casual sex” I am not just talking about intercourse. A lot of what passes as non-sex is oral sex, dry sex, sexting, nakedness intended to arouse, and other forms of sex play. For many, this kind of sexual activity is not considered sex at all. Of course, God’s commandment against adultery includes all aspects of fornication.

2See Jeremiah 23:29, ESV.

3See 1 John 2:1-2, ESV.

4See Ephesians 2:4-5, ESV.

5See Ezekiel 33:11, ESV.

6In Revelation 19:11-13, St. John says, “Then I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse! The one sitting on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war. His eyes are like a flame of fire, and
on his head are many diadems, and he has a name written that no one knows but himself. He is clothed in a robe
dipped in blood, and the name by which he is called is The Word of God” (ESV).

7See John 19:30.

8Regarding the 500 eyewitnesses, see 1 Corinthians 15:3-8.


10See Genesis 4:9-10, ESV.

11In Matthew 7:1-5, Jesus forbids hypocritical judging. But he enjoins loving admonition, saying in Luke 17:3,
“So watch yourselves. If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him.” Likewise Paul says in 1
Timothy 5:20, “Those who sin are to be rebuked publicly, so that the others may take warning.”

12When Jesus calls himself the “Son of Man,” he is taking this ascription primarily from Daniel 7:13.
Nevertheless, the LORD refers to the prophet Ezekiel as the “son of man” 93 times in the book bearing the prophet’s
name.

13See John 5:24, ESV.