



Morrison Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church

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August 31, 2008

16th Sunday after Pentecost

Ezekiel 33:7-11

Pastor Randy Ott

First Lesson: Ezekiel 33:7-11

Psalm of the Day: Psalm 51a

Second Lesson: Romans 13:1-10

Gospel: Matthew 18:15-20

Who Watches the Watchmen?

The watchmen

The Chief watchman

It's a recurring theme in literature and movies and even in comics. There is a group of people that are the watchmen that watch over everyone and protect everyone, and the plot develops as to who is watching over the watchmen. What happens when they go bad? If you take all of our readings today together, I think we get God's answer to who watches the watchmen.

God made us all watchmen and he has made us all accountable to one another. I think that is a truth that He lays in front of us. That's a humbling truth. That's a scary truth. But it is a divine truth. So our God reminds us that He is watching us, but He reminds us of this not in a way that should scare us, but in a way that should bring us great comfort and give us a great desire to carry out our task of being watchmen.

The concept of watchmen—those who are supposed to take care of others, protect others from danger—that's the concept of a watchmen in the Old Testament. Where there were fortified cities, still many people lived outside of the city. The watchmen had to keep watch to see danger coming from a distance so they could let the people outside know to get in to find safety inside the walled cities of Jerusalem or some other fortified city. So if the watchman isn't doing his job, then a lot of people are going to die. That's why God had said to Ezekiel, "Son of man"—His title that He uses for Ezekiel, I think it's 93 times in this book—"Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel." He is doing his watch over the house of Israel while they were in the Babylonian captivity. They had been carried off. Their sins had so separated them from God, the kingdom of Judah, that the Babylonians had come and conquered them and carried them off, and they were going to spend 70 years away from their homes, away from the temple of the Lord where God had caused the glory of His name to dwell, and they were going to have generations to think about their sins that had separated them from God. That's why in that second paragraph the people were saying, "Oh our sins weigh us down and we can't endure the guilt of our sins," because they were living in this captivity at this point in time. They were longing to be there and see the smoke rising from the temple of the sacrifices and smell the sacrifices burning and hear the sounds of the animals being slaughtered so that they knew that these sacrifices were being offered to God and their sins were atoned for and they were then right with God.

They didn't have that in Babylon. They didn't have the familiar rituals of the temple to give them this comfort, so God sent various prophets to them even when they were in

Jerusalem. This time the prophet's job, He says, is to speak the word that God gave to His people. He says, "I have made you a watchman. You are to warn them for danger, but you aren't like those watchmen that stand on the walls and look in the distance. You are to be a watchman by hearing the word I speak." It's not being a watchman with your eyes, but with your ears, listening to God's message. That's what Ezekiel was to do. Then he was to speak it to the people. Even if it was a message that was to cause people pain or discomfort or even bring uncomfortable circumstances on Ezekiel himself. He says, "If I tell you to tell someone, 'If you don't turn from that sin, you are going to die,' and you don't tell them, they are going to die and I am going to hold you accountable for it." That's kind of scary.

God repeats some of that same thought in the New Testament. He says, "Those who watch over people as one who must give accounts for their souls are held to a higher standard." Because of things along these lines, what He is talking about here. He also tells him, "If you do what I tell you to do and if you warn them, if you perform your function as a watchman and listen to me and then warn them of the danger and they ignore you, they really ignored me. They will die for their sin. But you have been faithful to me. You will not die for their sin. You will not be accountable for their sin before me." That's kind of a scary thought especially when you think about what God has said in the other readings today.

We think of the watchman of the souls primarily, I suppose, as the pastor. The pastor is a watchman over souls, and this is a passage I have turned to many a time to do things I didn't really want to do but needed to be done. But it's not just your pastor who is the watchman of this congregation. Because it's quite clear in Matthew 18, isn't it? If you know of someone who is caught up in a sin, God says you should go and tell him his fault just between the two of you. You have been called to be the watchman on the wall. So these words also apply to you.

And when you think about it, it does make perfect sense, doesn't it? All of us are the watchmen who would be watching over each other. Think of how often you know a lot more about what is going on in people's lives than I do. I often have people say to me, "Don't you know about so and so or this or that?" And I say, "No, I don't. If you do, have you talked to them, because that is what God has called us to do."

You probably hear things down at the watering hole that I don't hear. You probably see things down at the watering hole that I don't see. So God has called all of us to be watchmen, out of love for the people Jesus has died for, to admonish them, to teach them, and then when they do repent, to assure them that Christ has taken away their sins.

That's a scary thing, isn't it? It's only that first paragraph that's a scary thing that if I know of someone that has sinned and I haven't confronted them or haven't talked to them about it in love, with gentleness and respect, where God says, "I will hold you accountable for his blood." That's scary and it should scare us, because what is at stake is people's souls, their eternal welfare. People that die caught up in a sin that has hardened their heart so that it has choked faith out of their life, they are going to hell. I don't care how nice they were, how loving they were, what wonderful people they were,

if they do not believe that Jesus is their Savior, they are going to hell. And God tells us, “Don’t put out the Spirit’s fire.” We put out the Spirit’s fire when we stop exposing ourselves to the source of the Spirit’s fire’s fuel—Word and Sacrament. When we cut ourselves off from that, the devil is still attacking. The devil wants to see us in hell. The devil is real. He is powerful. He is active. He is not as powerful as God, but if we don’t have God close to us, if we don’t hide His Word in our hearts, it won’t be there when we need to battle against the devil. That’s why it’s so important that we are always listening to what God says so that we can guard ourselves from sin and that we can call out to others when they are caught in sin.

Just in case we are that scared, God comes to us in that second paragraph with a beautiful, beautiful picture of his grace, doesn’t he? He doesn’t say, “I’m telling you to do this people because I can’t wait to see you trip up and then I’m going to let you have it because that’s just the kind of God I am.”

He says to us, “As surely as I live, I don’t take any pleasure in the death of the wicked. I’d rather have them turn from their ways and live. Turn, turn from your evil ways! Why will you die oh house of Israel?” You know this isn’t just God blowing smoke. He carried out these words to the utmost. He came to this world himself, became human, lived in our place perfectly because you and I fail to be perfect, because you and I don’t always speak up when we should, because you and I need someone else to watch over us, because you and I screw up and hurt one another and sin against our God. He lived perfectly and didn’t do any of that. Then He took all those times that we do it, loaded it up on His shoulders, carried it to the cross, and there all of our sins were punished. Then He gave us the Spirit at our baptism or when we heard the Word, and He brought us to faith so now, when God looks at us, He doesn’t see all of our failures. He doesn’t see all the times we’ve screwed up. He sees the perfection of Jesus Christ. We know these words are true because we’ve seen it played out year after year after year in our church year as we see Christ be born, live, die, rise and ascend. The first half of the church year, year after year after year, we focus on those truths. We know, as surely as the Lord lives, the grave couldn’t hold Him. He was raised to life for our justification. We know He wants us to live because He gave us life by taking away our sins. And as we saw in Bible Study, we love because He first loved us.

We might be scared about being a watchman, but when we see how much God has loved us and the love He has shown to us, then that petition that we pray “Forgive us our sins or trespasses, as we forgive those who sin or trespass against us,” we think about just how much we have sinned and how much our God has taken away. Then being that watchman that calls people to repentance and then assures them of God’s forgiveness is not a scary burden. It is a privileged joy.

You know, we sing it all the time on Sundays. “Restore to me the joy of our salvation.” Those aren’t just words. That’s what you and I get to live in every day—the joy of our salvation. Because we are sinners, we get distracted at times. We don’t live constantly in that joy. We get focused on this or that, but when we stop and we catch our breath and we reflect, the joy is right there. This is how much our God loves us. And this is how privileged we are to be so loved that now we get to love one another and serve as God’s watchman.