

St. Luke's Evangelical Lutheran Church -- Watertown, WI
Pastor Mark Gartner
Sermon for Mission Festival – Thursday September 18, 2014

Ezekiel 33:7-11

“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. 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.

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. “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?”’ 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?’

Fellow watchmen for the Kingdom of God,

The subject of evangelism makes many of us nervous because we struggle with our failures of telling people about Jesus – people at work, at school, at the gym, in our neighborhood, and in our families. We’d just as soon avoid thinking about our evangelism efforts because when we do, a rock of guilt lands in our stomachs with a thud. We are snapped out of our comfort zones where all is calm and sufficient to a world of guilt where expectations are never met and apathy and indifference are common.

Perhaps it’s not much different when it comes to the evangelism efforts of our congregation. We feel the weight of the rock of guilt because we know how much more we could be doing, but aren’t. We have to confess that it’s so easy to think just about ourselves and give less and less attention to efforts of reaching those who need to know Jesus for their salvation.

God has called us to be his witnesses. He gives his church—all believers—the command to proclaim his word to the world. Today we want to learn from the words God spoke to a man named Ezekiel. Though spoken a long time ago, this message of God still speaks to you and me today. He wants us to know what he’s done to remove the guilt of our failures in evangelism and thereby be inspired to witness more boldly and work more zealously to tell the message of salvation in Christ. Like Ezekiel, we are watchmen of the Lord. The message that we speak is a matter of life or death, so we dare not slumber. God calls to us:

Sermon Theme: Watchmen Of The LORD, Wake Up!

- 1) Wash Your Blood-Stained Hands.**
- 2) Sound The Alarm Of God’s Word.**

1. Wash your blood-stained hands.

As we tune into our text, it was about 600 years before Jesus was born. Nebuchadnezzar, the mighty ruler of Babylon, had sent a strong military force against Jerusalem. The king and 10,000 people were captured and taken to Babylon. Though the city wasn’t destroyed at that time, just a few years later Nebuchadnezzar’s forces laid siege to the city again. And this time it was completely destroyed. The captives in Babylon were demoralized by the news of Jerusalem’s doom. Without hope and without a future they were crushed under strict discipline of the Lord. But the Lord, who knew their sins and guilt, wanted to save them from his harsh judgment. So he stationed a man named Ezekiel to be there watchman. As a sentry is posted to remain alert and attentive to warn people of impending danger, so Ezekiel was commissioned by God to warn the people in clear and certain words about the destruction that their sin deserved.

Ezekiel 33:8, “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.” God reminded Ezekiel of the serious responsibility he had as a watchman for souls. The people had moved away from a relationship with God and because of their wickedness they were in great danger of eternal destruction. As their spiritual watchman, God called upon Ezekiel to warn the people of the consequence of their unbelief. He spoke strongly with Ezekiel because God was so concerned about his people—all precious souls to him. In love for them, he didn't want them to be lost and condemned. He earnestly desired that they return to him and live. The way that this would happen was by heeding the watchman's message. That's why it was so critically important for Ezekiel to speak out clearly the word of God.

God gives believers today the responsibility to be watchmen also. We are to speak God's Word clearly. Yes, like Ezekiel, we must warn unbelievers of God's judgment. This is so important because God loves them and wants them to repent so that they will not die eternally. This warning is the message that God uses to make people see the need for his salvation. Then faithful watchmen can shout the good news of God's love in Christ—the gospel which is the power of God for the salvation of treasured souls.

But in reality how often do we beat ourselves up for failing to be faithful watchmen. Many times we feel like the man who was driving on a freeway one early morning. Just ahead he saw a SUV sharply swerve to the right onto the shoulder, then sharply turn back onto the other shoulder. It was clear what was happening—the driver had briefly fallen asleep at the wheel. As he became alert, he cranked the steering wheel trying to compensate but turned too sharply. The SUV tires grabbed the pavement and flipped the vehicle rolling four times on the highway and crashed violently into the median. Stunned, the man zoomed right by the overturned vehicle, wheels still spinning in the twisted mess. In an instant he had to make a decision—stop and help or continue on. What thoughts, do you think rushed through his head? “I'm no doctor. I don't even have a cell phone. I don't know CPR. There are other people stopping now. I've got some important things that I need to get to. I should stop. I could drag the people to safety. I could comfort them. I could tell them about Christ.” But he didn't stop. For whatever reason, he kept going. But as much as he didn't want to look back, his mind and his heart wouldn't let him forget. The guilt for not helping those people was nearly overwhelming. He stood before God accountable for his inaction. His hands were stained with sin's guilt.

We look at our own hands and see the stains of missed opportunities and indifference to others. We stand with blood-stained hands when we fail to take the opportunities that God gives our congregation to rescue people in our community whose lives have been crushed with sin and pull them to the safety of salvation through the gospel of Jesus. There is a powerful blood that cleanses blood-stained hands like ours. How comforting for each of us that the blood of God's Son, Jesus Christ, cleanses us from all sins—even those sins of neglecting our responsibility of speaking up for Jesus. God's wonderful love in Jesus has washed our blood-stained hands and our guilty hearts!

It was the same in Ezekiel's day. The Lord reminded those people who were crushed by God's discipline for their wickedness that he loved them and saved them from the death they deserved for their sin. He did this not because they were physical descendants of Abraham, not because they made the right sacrifices, but because he loves sinners and every soul is a treasure to him.

Ezekiel 33:11, “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?’” The Lord did not want to see them suffer eternal damnation for their sins. He pleaded with them to confess and repent of their wicked ways. The Lord would graciously free them from their guilt and wash their blood-stained hands clean. The Lord speaks to us too. He calls upon us to repent and confess our sins, and trust in him who washes clean our blood-stained hands. Do not let past sins and failures lead us to despair and apathy. The Lord has freed us from the chains of guilt by his loving forgiveness through his Son. The debt is paid. He no longer treats us

as our sins deserve. In Jesus we are free from the guilt of our sins and free to serve as his watchmen in this world. As his watchmen we called upon to sound the alarm of God's Word.

2. Sound the Alarm of God's Word!

The Lord held Ezekiel to a high standard as the watchman of Israel. He would require Ezekiel to give an account if he failed to speak God's Word and to shine a light on the evil path the Israelites had taken. The world has no built in alarm that will go off warning the wayward to come back to the Lord. There is no warning light that glows bright red when people sin. There is no siren emitting a high-pitched scream when people are careening down the path to hell. No, those red lights, sirens and alarms take the form of God's people loving the world as he does. You and I are warning lights that our fellow sinners see, the sirens and alarms they hear.

Matthew 5:14-15 “**You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house.**” Why? What motivates us to sound the alarm? What moves a Christian to stick his nose in his children's life, his family's life, his fellow believer's life, his neighbor's life, his co-worker's life and sound the alarm of God's Word? Is it fear of hell, guilt over past failures? No, it is the love of Christ that moves us to sound the alarm. The love of the Lord Jesus who sacrificed himself in life and death for a world of sinners that they might have life empowers believers to sound the alarm. The compassion of Christ that looked upon us poor sinners and moved him to walk the path of the cross motivates us to sound the alarm for all people to hear.

The fear of rejection and failure at times drains our power to speak and act. But when we learn to love others the way God loves us, we are empowered to speak and act even when it is difficult. The love of Christ moves us to speak and act in love for others, recognizing that every soul is a treasure. We speak the truth about sin, death and the devil because we love others not wanting them to be crushed by eternal consequences of sin. We speak the truth about Jesus, salvation, and heaven because we love others wanting them to share with us the joy of being children of God now and forever. **2 Corinthians 5:14, “For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died.”**

A woman was going through a very difficult time. She said she was a Christian but she had been away from church for a long time. She had been through a rough life in abusive relationships, addicted to drugs, and sexually abused. It was at her lowest point in the psychiatric ward of a hospital that she heard the alarm go off. It was sounded by a Christian who in love opened his mouth to tell her the great news of God's love for all sinners. She heard of the life, death and resurrection of her Savior that paid the price for all her sins and guaranteed her forgiveness and eternal life. She learned that her sins no longer counted against her. God would not treat her as her sins deserved. When God looked at her, he smiled and loved her. She was free from the guilt of her past and free to live the future out of thanks to her Savior. With tears of joy she whispered to the Christian watchman sounding the alarm, “Why have I never heard that before? Thank you.”

We know the love of God for sinners. We know what it is like to live free from the guilt of sin and the hold of eternal death. But many do not. Many live in fear of God and trapped in their own guilt with no true hope for the future. Watchmen of the Lord, wake up. Because our blood-stained hands and guilty hearts are washed clean by the pure blood of Jesus, we are privileged as watchmen for our Lord to sound the alarm of God's Word. We can confidently proclaim the truth of Jesus' love. May we not rest until the sound of that alarm rings out from our lives, from our congregation, from our synod to every treasured soul! Amen.