

14th SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
September 6, 2020

Text: Ezekiel 33:7-11

Theme: Sentinels

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ – Amen

In Sylmar, California, everyone thought the fires were too far away to be dangerous. An alarm was sounded in the middle of the night to let the residents know that the fires were spreading faster than expected. People in the community rushed to the Equestrian Center to rescue the 40 terrified horses.

While the fires continued to erupt in California more than 500,000 residents in Louisiana and Texas were being urged to leave their homes immediately. Grave warnings were sent that described a storm that would deliver a catastrophic assault on any city in its path. Both state and city officials warned that this was a monster of a storm that was un-survivable.

While watching the news about the devastation Hurricane Laura left behind / all our electronic devices sent out a loud and screeching flash flood warning because of the multiple storms that were moving throughout our area. While many of us were in the comfort of our homes we could not escape the sound of the sirens.

When we are in the path of something that is dangerous and life-threatening an alarm is sounded (for fires and hurricanes and flash floods). Once the experts know the exact path of the storms those in the way are sent a warning to leave the area immediately. We are left on our own to make those final decisions to shelter-in-place or to leave our homes and their contents behind. It is incredible to think about the number of lives that have been saved because people paid attention to those warnings. Before we had those systems in place the loss of lives was so much greater.

A warning is sounded in our lesson from the Old Testament. Did we hear it? Our Lord was speaking to Ezekiel who God assigned to be a sentinel (a watchman) for the house of Israel. As a sentinel it was his

responsibility to sound the alarm and announce an approaching threat (an impending danger). But this was not some outside force headed their way. It was the dire consequence of their own behaviors. It was a matter of life or death.

Like the warnings we receive when there is a natural disaster headed towards us, those who heard this message from Ezekiel had a choice. They could listen to his counsel or ignore it and continue to do their own thing. Ezekiel would be held accountable for whether or not he spoke the words of the Lord. He would not be held responsible for their response. He could not force the people to listen.

Let me be clear in my understanding of this lesson and what it means for us as a faith community. God is pronouncing his judgment on the wicked (on those who do not obey his words). God has called Ezekiel to be the one to sound the alarm and to tell the people that they would die if they did not listen to the warning and turn their lives around.

The situation was so serious in the eyes of God that he told the prophet Ezekiel that if he did not sound the alarm then the blood of the wicked was on him. You see without this message the people would have no idea what was coming. Someone had to tell them. And that responsibility was given to Ezekiel.

But there is more to this story than a simple call to repentance. We hear it in the last two verses of our lesson. In response to the warning the people acknowledged the weight of their own sins. They wanted to know what they could do to live. And the Lord responded that it was not his intention for them to die. While the house of Israel was certainly threatened with death, God wanted to warn the people before death came. God wanted them to have a path out of their situation.

God takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked. In 1 Timothy we read that God our Savior desires everyone to be saved. So God will reach out to those who consider themselves righteous and invite them to reach out to those who are disobedient. We are to be aware enough to know that danger is coming to them. We are to notice that things are not lining up as they should. And then we are to shout the warning. We are to love the other enough to reach out to them with the word of God.

And it is up to the other to trust and heed the advice.

In verse 10 the house of Israel asks – *How can we live?*
In response God asks – *Why will you die?*
Why would you choose death when you can be alive?
Those are good and valid questions.

Notice how I already made the assumption that we are not the wicked so that has left us in the role of the sentinel (the watchman). I hope that makes you uncomfortable! For if we are to take on this role then some kind of self-examination would be a good place to start. For example it is a fact that we are living in a very divisive nation right now. At a time when we are being asked on almost any topic to take sides we need to watch our words and our actions so that we demonstrate to others that we live according to the word of the Lord. As we hear in Romans we are to live honorably. Every day we are to put on Jesus Christ.

It is only when we can be honest with ourselves and with others that we can take on this role as a sentinel (a watchman). It is on us if we do not sound the alarm and blow the trumpet when we see an impending danger. The call of the church is to speak out about injustices and the inequities that we see. The call of the church is to speak out about greed and exploitation and the degradation of the environment because if nobody ever tells us that we are wrong . . . then we will never get it right.

Ezekiel was told by the Lord to warn the wicked to turn from their ways or there would be consequences. But this was not simply about a holy command and the obedience of a prophet. We cannot overlook the fact that Ezekiel had a relationship with the house of Israel. He did not just walk into the lives of these people. For over two decades he served as a prophet. His capacity to be a sentinel (a watchman) was not only out of his responsibility to the Lord but (for him) out of his own sense of compassion for those he knew so well. In two weeks we will see the sharp contrast when we read the story of Jonah. Jonah was also called to warn the wicked but he lacked that critical element. He lacked compassion.

It is with integrity and a deep care for others that we are called to speak the truth in love. We are called to speak the words of the Lord and not our own thoughts and not our own words. We already heard that the church is a sentinel.

As your pastor am I a sentinel as well? If I take my ordination vows seriously then the answer is – *Yes! Of course!* And the alarm and the siren and the trumpet I want to sound today is that we must know the word of the Lord well enough that when we speak we do not distort or change his intentions or his purpose. When we call people out for their behaviors let us also recognize our own complicities. Live honorably so that we can encourage others to do the same. Put on the Lord Jesus Christ so that we can invite others to do the same. Do not ask of others what we are not willing to do ourselves.

The word spoken by the sentinel must communicate the frustration God has with our sin but also the passion for life and for healing that is ultimately what God wants for us. God does not desire death but life. God is sending a warning, but God is also telling us that we can be restored. Sound the trumpet and let it play the right notes. Amen