

“The Heart of a Watchman”

Introduction: At last Sunday’s church meeting, we voted to move ahead with repairing our steeple so that it could remain structurally safe and sound, and so that the bell cast by Paul Revere bell can ring once again. As I read this morning’s text with that discussion “ringing” in my mind, I couldn’t help but think of another story involving Paul Revere and a steeple, the story of the early warning signal he orchestrated to have one lantern hung in the steeple of the Old North Church in Boston’s North End if the British were advancing toward Concord by land, and two lanterns if they were making their approach by water. The Old North Church was chosen because it was the tallest building in Boston at the time and so easily visible from far away, and because the custodian of the church, Robert John Newman, was a fellow patriot and had access to the church in the middle of the night.

Like Paul Revere instructed that custodian, in this morning’s text we see God instructing Ezekiel to provide a warning signal for the people of Israel who were now living, in the 6th c. B.C., in exile in Babylon due to their persistent rebellion against the life God had called them to live. Ezekiel was to be a watchman, or sentry. It describes one who would be posted in a tower, or on some elevated place of a village or city, to keep a lookout for any movements of the enemy, and to blow a trumpet or horn to warn the residents if any danger was detected, giving them time to respond.

What was the nature of the danger Ezekiel was to trumpet? As a watchman, what was Ezekiel’s responsibility? What is our own? How can we nurture the heart of a watchman so that we may participate helpfully in God’s early warning system?

I. The Nature of the Danger

A. The nature of the danger is that God is holy and righteous and just and therefore not to be taken lightly or trifled with! He is serious about the way he has called us to live, both for our sake, as well as for the sake of others, and ultimately for his glory, his honor and reputation. And the warning is that if one is wicked and does not repent and turn from their evil ways, death—eternal separation from God—will be their destiny. Further, if one is righteous but turns from that righteous living and instead lives a life of evil, they too will experience eternal death.

B. To be sure these are hard words. But what’s easy to miss is the heart of God that this warning reveals. Who is the enemy that the warning is about? The enemy was not King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, who had taken God’s people into exile. The enemy was none other than God himself! Yet the paradox is that God, in Ezekiel, is posting a watchman to warn the people about himself. What kind of enemy would want to provide a warning of his own approach? It tells us, I think, that the point in setting a watchman is to save life, not lose it. Because God is just and can’t simply turn and look the other way, those who are persistently and unrepentantly wicked will die for their sin. But the desire of God’s heart, seen in the very act of setting up an urgent warning system against himself, is that they should not do so.

C. A bit later in the book, when God returns to Ezekiel’s role as watchman, we hear the longing of God’s heart more clearly (33:10-11):

Son of man, say to the Israelites, “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, people of Israel?”

We get a similar picture of God’s heart in the NT from Peter’s second letter. As he speaks about the day of reckoning to come, known as the Day of the Lord, Peter writes: “The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance” (2 Pe. 3:9). The longing of God’s heart is that our hearts turn, or return, to his.

II. The Nature of the Watchman’s Responsibility

A. In the midst of this longing, what is the nature of Ezekiel’s responsibility, and how might it inform our own? What Ezekiel is *not* responsible for is whether he is successful in persuading the wicked to repent, or in dissuading the righteous from backsliding. His “success,” if we can call it that, is only measured by whether or not he has been faithful in communicating the warning. If he fails to speak out, God will hold him accountable.

B. Part of the struggle in sharing the good news of the gospel is that it begins with the need to acknowledge bad news. It begins with the reality of our sin and the danger of God’s judgment. Beginning here was not limited to the OT prophets. Bad news is where John the Baptist began as he called people to prepare the way for the Lord by straightening out the crooked roads of their lives (Lk. 3:4-9). Bad news is where Jesus began when we notice that the first word of his first public sermon is “Repent ... for the kingdom of heaven has come near” (Ma. 4:17). God is holy and righteous and just and so he will not, he cannot, turn his back on sin.

Illustration: I was watching an episode of Blue Bloods last week which brought this home. Ex-Essex resident Donnie Wahlberg plays a New York City detective called Danny. In this particular episode, Danny was struggling because a woman had robbed a bank in order to pay for the treatment needed by her husband, a marine who had been badly injured in the war. They needed the money because the government hadn’t done a thing for this man. Danny was struggling because he had also served as a marine and knew the pain this couple was experiencing. He was tempted to look the other way and not arrest this woman and put her in jail. But he also knew that he was sworn to uphold the law and if he did look the other way, justice would not be served.

The good news of what God does, that Danny couldn’t do, is that God, in Christ, substitutes himself for this guilty woman and serves her sentence so that she can go free, forgiven, into a new life. The woman, as do we all, needs to first understand the bad news of her guilt, and seek to turn from it, longing for God to act. At the same time, so acting—giving up his life for us—is the pleasure and longing of God’s heart. The bad news, then, is that when we are measured against God’s holy standard, we are really “badder” than we might be willing to admit. The good news is that God still loves us more than we could ever ask or imagine.

C. This is the news that we have to share. As Paul puts it to the church in Corinth, “God made him [Jesus] who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God”

(2 Cor. 5:21). Our role as watchmen, or God's ambassadors as Paul puts it, is to share this reconciling love of God with others. We have been given the ministry of reconciliation. Of course, this is not easy, and has perhaps become more difficult in our cultural atmosphere of post-modern relativism in which people are neither right or wrong, but simply thought to be coming from a different perspective which we're told we need to affirm. However, notice that there is still a recognized need for smoke detectors, fire alarms, security guards, seat belts, and anti-virus software! Our task as watchmen stems from the conviction that there are fatal dangers in the moral and spiritual realm that we need to warn others about.

So, how can we nurture our hearts so that we might participate helpfully in God's warning system?

III. Nurturing Our Hearts

A. As we saw last week, we need to keep on "eating" the word, taking in the word of God in daily bites so that our souls might be nourished, our minds informed, and our lives transformed, by the vision of the glory of God. Such a vision ranges from the brilliance of what Ezekiel saw, to the sobering picture of Jesus hanging on a cross. A second century theologian, St. Irenaeus, puts it this way:

For the glory of God is a human person fully alive, and the life of humanity consists in the vision of God.

In other words, we are to live lives that reflect God's way of being toward the world, lives of forgiveness, compassion, mercy, and justice. The word helps us to know what this looks like.

B. We need to then check our hearts and see where they might still be obstinate, stubborn, and rebellious, asking God to wash us clean, forgive us, and heal us.

C. We need to make sure the longing of our hearts is in sync with the longing of God's heart, that we're not interested in growing our church as much as we are in seeing that every man, woman, and child, where we live, learn, work, and play, has repeated opportunities to see, hear, and respond to the good news about Jesus. Can our heart break for those who don't know the goodness and love of God that comes to us through Jesus? Can we own the lostness of our communities to the extent that we can't help but want to share, as a watchman or an ambassador, our experience of the goodness and hope that Jesus has brought to us?