

**Sermon: It Takes a Village**

New North Church, Hingham

Rev. Steven Aucella

10 September 2017

Based on **Psalm 119:33-40; Ezekiel 33: (1-6) 7-11**

In our two readings today, one, Psalm 119, is a plea for understanding in order to keep God's laws, and the other shows us how we find life both in God and in the law the psalmist seeks to understand.

Psalm 119 is the longest psalm in the Bible, and it's just two away from the shortest, which is Psalm 117. Our psalm consists of 22 stanzas of eight lines each, and, in Hebrew, it is an acrostic, where the first word in each stanza begins with the next letter in the alphabet, in order, so *Aleph* – *Bet* – and so on. The passage just read by Jordan is the fifth stanza in the poem, and the first word there begins with the letter *Hey*, the fifth letter in the Hebrew alphabet.

The psalm includes eight different terms for the law throughout, and our stanza includes all eight: *statutes, understanding, law, commandments, decrees, promise, ordinances, and precepts*. God's law is many things.

We're not born knowing these things, which the psalmist acknowledges when he says, 'Teach me, O Lord; Give me understanding.' We're a blank slate in many ways. We must be taught, for better or worse, and what we are taught, we seek to understand.

As for Ezekiel, we hardly ever hear from him when we follow the lectionary. Mostly, we only read about the valley of the dry bones – or the recipe for the bread. Today's chapter serves as a bridge between the earlier chapters that warn against foreign powers, and the rest of the book that deals with hope and restoration, which is where we find the dry bones in chapter 37.

Ezekiel, along with most of the Jerusalem elite, is living in exile in Babylon. God's judgment has already come; now we're on the cusp of restoration and renewal. Ezekiel is a full member of the Jewish community, called to be God's prophet, but early on in chapter 3, God also set him apart as a watcher, like a sentinel on a city wall. The sentinel has one responsibility: sound the warning.

Earlier in this chapter, God tells Ezekiel: ‘If *I* bring the sword upon a land, [...], and *if* the sentinel sees the sword coming [...] *and* blows the trumpet and warns the people; *then* if any who hear the sound of the trumpet do *not* take warning, and the sword comes and takes them away, their blood shall be upon their own heads. [...] But if the sentinel sees the sword coming and does not blow the trumpet, so that the people are *not* warned, and the sword comes and takes any of them, they are taken away in their iniquity, but their blood I will require at the sentinel’s hand.’

With a sentinel on the job, you can never say you weren’t warned, but you have to heed the warning. The implication is that, if we have enough warning, we can turn our lives around and live. And it won’t go well for the sentinel if he fails to do his duty.

There’s an interesting wrinkle here. In the passage we just heard, God said, ‘If *I* bring the sword upon a land,’ and in today’s passage, God said, ‘whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning *from me*.’ The KJV has it as ‘warn them from me.’ Apparently, God is the one we should be worried about. YHWH is the danger. And yet, God cares enough about us to appoint a sentinel to warn us when we stray as a nation. God wants us to live, and provides a way to do it: obey God’s law.

The whole point of the law, the statutes, the commandments, is that by obeying them, we end up living in harmony. When things go wrong, we have a remedy in the law which enables us to continue living in harmony, in community, in communion.

So why would God bring the sword to the land in the first place? Why would we need a sentinel to warn us, and why does the psalmist devote so much time trying to understand why we need to keep God’s law? Maybe because we’re only human, and God knows that our collective transgressions hold some serious consequences.

Humans typically don’t like to be told what to do. If I tell you the stove is hot, and you touch it anyway, whose fault is that? If I fail to warn you about it, and you get burned, what then? With hurricanes Harvey, Irma, and Jose in the background, what does it mean to ignore the warnings? If I’m in Sarasota today and I decide to shelter in place, and my house gets blown away, that’s my unfortunate choice.

Around here in the winter, it’s always the next snowstorm that’s going to bury us. When it doesn’t, we poke fun at the people who predicted a disaster that didn’t occur.

Some day, we might all end up on the evening news, either floating down the street on a rooftop, or climbing out a bedroom window to shovel the driveway.

That's all normal life-and-limb stuff; that's why we have the Weather Channel. God and Ezekiel are talking about something else entirely. They are more concerned with the *nation's* sin, what I just called our 'collective transgressions.' These are all the things that people gather to protest about, the things 'in our social system,' the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. once wrote, 'to which all of us ought to be maladjusted.' When we establish systems that are rigged to benefit one group over another, God notices.

God notices when the scales in the marketplace are weighted in favor of the vendor. God notices when we subvert justice by giving or taking a bribe, or when a bank offers favorable mortgage rates only to some people and not to others. These things all add up to become the sin of the nation, and, eventually, God will post a sentinel like Ezekiel to watch for God's retribution, to give us a chance to turn back.

God gives life through our obeying the law, God's law. The psalmist says God's promise 'is for those who fear' God. *Fear*, in the Bible, in this context, is a term meaning worship and obedience; for example, a 'God-fearin man' is one who worships God and obeys God's laws.

In many ways, our society is broken because we don't do these things. Our politics are divisive; we're irritable with each other. 'As I live, says the LORD God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked.' In the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, especially, we see Jesus rebuilding the community through healing and reconciliation. His mission and his ministry was to gather in all the lost sheep back to God. We read about it; we see how he did it – now we are called to do it too.

In a 1779 letter, Ben Franklin wrote, 'Behold the rain which descends from heaven upon our vineyards; there it enters the roots of the vines, to be changed into wine; a constant proof that God loves us, and loves to see us happy.'

God's law is about justice; God's law is also about how we are meant to live in community. God does love to see us happy. And we are happiest when we live in fellowship, which is what we are meant to remember when we gather at the Communion table. As my colleague Audra Teague Mackey asks, 'the question is upon us: Whose side are we on?' Amen.