

Sermon: In Other Words

New North Church, Hingham

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Based on **Ezekiel 33: (1-6) 7-11; Matthew 18:15-20**

If you are familiar with the ‘thumbs up’ gesture, you may be amused to learn that we have literally flipped the meaning of it upside-down.

In the Coliseum, Caesar would poll the audience to get a feel for whether a defeated gladiator deserved death or not, and that became a thumbs-up/thumbs-down decision. But *thumbs up* was an enthusiastic signal that meant, yeah; kill him! And *thumbs down* meant, don’t kill him; he deserves to live. We may have gotten it wrong but at least Caesar asked for input.

Our Gospel reading comes after the story of the shepherd who went after one lost sheep, and upon finding it, rejoiced. In verse 14, immediately before today’s story began, Jesus said, “It is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost.” That sort of echoes verse 11 in our Ezekiel reading.

We hardly ever hear from Ezekiel when we follow the lectionary. Mostly, we only read about the valley of the dry bones – or the recipe for bread in chapter four. Today’s chapter as a whole 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, lived in exile in Babylon. God’s judgment has already come; now the Jewish community is on the cusp of return and renewal. Ezekiel may be a full member of the community, but he’s also God’s prophet. Early on, God set him apart as a sentinel, like a watchman on a city wall. The sentinel has one responsibility: sound the warning when trouble appears.

With a sentinel on the job, you can never say you weren’t warned, but you must heed the warning when given. With 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 job. It seems that everyone has an interest to protect.

Today's reading duplicates almost exactly a warning given in chapter three, with the added expression of the people's despair and regret over their transgressions and sins. Apparently, they have done terrible things and thus terrible things have come to them.

How about this, though: We heard God say, first, 'If I bring the sword upon a land,' and then, 'whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning *from me,*' or, as the KJV has it, *you shall 'warn them from me.'*¹ God seems to be the one we should be worried about; YHWH is the potential 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 for us to do it: repentance.

So why would God bring the sword upon the land in the first place? Why would we need a sentinel to warn us? Is it because God knows that our collective transgressions hold serious consequences of which we are blissfully unaware? Or are we just stubborn?

Yes, to both, I think.

We can read the passage from Ezekiel and, to a lesser extent, Matthew, as advocating a 'turn or burn' kind of theology, meaning if the people change their sinful ways, they will live, but if they don't, God will destroy them, or at least boot them out of the community.

There are people then and now who want it to be this way, and they have waited a long time to hear God lay it on the line.

People 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 hurt, what does that say about me? A three-year old who just touched the hot stove in my presence will never trust me again.

The Weather Channel tells us that we're well and truly in hurricane season now; should we ignore evacuation warnings if we're in harm's way? If I decide to shelter in place, and my house gets blown to bits, will my insurance pay for 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.

Yet, someday, we might end up on the evening news, either floating down the street on a rooftop, or climbing out an upstairs bedroom window to shovel the driveway.

That's just everyday life-and-limb stuff; that's why we have the Weather Channel.

God and Ezekiel are talking about something else entirely. They are concerned with the *nation's* sin, what I just called our 'collective transgressions.' These are the things that people will protest against, as the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, 'until the good society is realized.'²

God notices when the scales in the marketplace are weighted in favor of the vendor. God notices when we subvert justice by either giving or taking a bribe, or when a bank offers favorable mortgage rates only to some people and not to others. God notices when we build systems that are rigged to benefit one group over another. 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.

In many ways, our society is broken because we continually do these things. Our politics are divisive; there's no middle ground; we're irritable with each other. 'As I live, says the LORD God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked.' This verse is, you might say, the center of gravity in this reading.

In the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, especially, the focus is on reconciliation as Jesus rebuilds the community. For him, the ultimate goal was finding all the lost sheep and restoring them to the fold.

Ezekiel, in his role as the sentinel, knows his people well, and is on their side. In fact, his life is on the line for their sake. He speaks for God but also for them. He would encourage those who want to offer helpful words to those in troubled situations to do so. His goal and purpose are to help us live a full life oriented on God. And God has shown us what is good and how to live into it. The sentinel's job is to be helpful.

So, in no way is either passage about God's punishment. There is no 'burn'.

But there are those who will refuse reconciliation and forgiveness, and that can be frustrating and mystifying to the rest of us.

Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, whatever you *bind* on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you *loose* on earth will be loosed in heaven" (18:18). This is exactly what he told Simon Peter not long ago in chapter 16 (16:19).

Binding and loosing signify how God and humans are tied together by what is allowed or disallowed. When things go wrong, discussion, reconciliation, repentance, and forgiveness all enable us to continue living in community and in communion.

Forgiveness is an ever-flowing stream, to paraphrase Amos (5:24). And Jesus assures us that he's here with us, even in the smallest gathering, working always for reconciliation, to build, restore, and maintain the faith community.

Recently, a good friend of ours died. She was the last O.G. in the neighborhood where I grew up, and she had quite a lot to do with keeping me on the straight and narrow. She was a Protestant before I knew what that was, and whether she knew it or not, she embodied Jesus' teaching about (gently) pointing out my faults and getting me to listen. Without her, I may have turned out the same way, more or less, but it was a lot easier with her as my conscience and guide. We do miss her.

Ezekiel teaches us that each individual is responsible for their own fate, but that salvation is a community-wide project with the sentinel's help. If we have heard and heeded the warnings, we can always repent and turn back.

In Matthew, it is our brothers and sisters in the faith community that warn us and guide us, not just a lone, overworked sentinel.

God loves us and wants us to be happy, even if happiness may be hard to define. And we are happiest when we live in fellowship, working together for the greater welfare of the community, which is what Jesus asks us to remember when we gather for Communion at the Lord's Table.

In other words, it takes a village, and we call it *church*.

Amen.

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¹ 'So thou, O son of man, I have set thee a watchman unto the house of Israel; therefore thou shalt hear the word at my mouth, and **warn them from me.**' KJV.

² Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, transcript of speech at SMU on March 17, 1966, <https://www.smu.edu/News/2014/mlk-at-smu-transcript-17march1966>.