

“Be my watchmen!” Ezekiel 33:7-11

“So, you, son of man, I have made a watchman for the house of Israel. Whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me. If I say to the wicked, O wicked one, you shall surely die, and you do not speak to warn the wicked to turn from his way, that wicked person shall die in his iniquity, but his blood I will require at your hand. But if you warn the wicked to turn from his way, and he does not turn from his way, that person shall die in his iniquity, but you will have delivered your soul. “And you, son of man, say to the house of Israel, Thus, have you said: ‘Surely our transgressions and our sins are upon us, and we rot away because of them. How then can we live?’ Say to them, As I live, declares the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways, for why will you die, O house of Israel?”

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ!

What a reading we have for our meditation today! The Word of God from Ezekiel the prophet! Do you know what the Good News sounds like? How about this?

“As I live, declares the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways!” This is it! The Holy God speaking to us!

Speaking to everyone! Speaking to those who have despised Him, rejected Him, neglected Him, displeased Him, let Him down, denied Him, failed Him... as you can gather, speaking to each one of us! **“I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked!”**

“But I do have pleasure if the wicked turns from his way to me and lives, this is what brings me pleasure!” See, whatever you are, whatever your story, however many times you have let God down, His pleasure is that you turn to Him and live!

The Good News for us. This message comes from the very heart of God the Father and brings us His grace. It should also bring us great joy and comfort, but somehow... too often it brings... What is that word that I am looking for? Can you help me?

Trouble, yes, trouble! The message of the watchman brings trouble. How’s that? Let’s see. Let’s reflect on what trouble it brings, how it impacts you, and on two things that help us to rejoice even in the midst of trouble. First, what trouble we are talking about.

Ezekiel speaks about the calling of watchmen, more specifically about watchmen in a spiritual sense; about those who are to be alert and watch out for possible spiritual dangers and then warn others of those dangers.

What do you think, how does that sound? Like a great calling? Like a noble thing to do? Let me tell you, that can be a very difficult calling. Can you guess why? Because we don’t want to listen! Because those who are being warned don’t want to listen!

Sounds strange, sounds illogical?! I know. Who wouldn’t want to be warned of danger? Especially of a spiritual danger that may put at risk the most precious gift that we have – eternal life with Jesus Christ in New Heavens and New Earth.

But nevertheless, it is true. And the Bible is full of such examples. We just don't want to hear those warnings. It was the case with literally all the prophets. Who listened to them? It was the case with Jesus Himself. Who wanted to listen to Him? It was the case with all the apostles. And it has been the case for most of history.

The question that we need to ask ourselves is this – why is it so difficult to listen to warnings that something may endanger our faith? It sounds like a good thing if we have someone who cares for our spiritual well being, who actually is concerned about our eternal fate. So... why wouldn't we want to listen? What do you think?

This is a serious question. I invite all of you to examine your own thoughts. Perhaps, it is because if we do listen to such warnings, it may require our response, maybe some action, maybe even some changes in our lives. It may pull us out of our comfort zone.

How many live with this sense that “my congregation has always been here and always will be, why would I worry about anything”? On the one hand, sure, we have Jesus' promise that the gates of hell will not prevail against His Church. She will remain forever. Amen to that. But... the same is not true when speaking about congregations or even church bodies. Just look at the church history or look around.

But if we do listen to our watchmen, we may be facing some tough decisions, we may need to get involved. Think about this, what is easier – to overcome our desire for peaceful and comfortable lives and our unwillingness to deal with some spiritual dangers, or perhaps... it is easier to lash out at the watchman.

“What is wrong with you? Why do you say those unpleasant things? Why do you confront us with this unpleasant truth? Some of that doesn't sound too loving? You are not saying nice things about those people. That's fearmongering...”.

I do know what is easier. It is so much easier not to move a finger and to let my mind come up with hundreds of excuses on why I shouldn't listen. “It can't be that bad, this watchman just makes it sound dramatic. It can't be that bad...”

There is no shortage of illustrations in our own Lutheran Church of how we don't want to listen. For example, pastors as watchmen may see the dangers and may want to warn their members that this or that teaching or practice is contrary to the Word of God, that it is dangerous for our spiritual well being.

And too often they already know what to expect. Resistance or even rebuke from some unhappy members, who didn't want to be warned. Sometimes it may get even worse, if someone is offended by the warning, pastors may expect a call from the district, and their bishops may issue some warnings on their own. “Why do you rock the boat? Why do you disturb the peace?” Why do you call things as they are?

In such situations pastors are stuck between the rock and the hard place. Some have more energy; they keep fighting the good fight. Striving to be good watchmen. Good on them. Some get worn out and give up. No judging there.

For how long can you be in a hostile situation, where both, those whom you are called to serve and those who are supposed to care for you, rebuke you for trying to do what you have vowed to do before God and His saints.

Reflect on this, what a tragedy it is! When our called and ordained watchmen trying to be faithful are overcome by pressures from those who don't want to be warned, who want to please people and the world rather than God.

Now, what are you thinking about when you hear this? Perhaps it is something like...

"What is wrong with you, Pastor? Why do you say these unpleasant things? Why do you confront us with this unpleasant truth? Some of that doesn't sound too loving. You are not saying nice things about those people."

See, this is how our old Adam whispers in our ears. It's true. Too often we don't want to be warned by our watchmen, by our shepherds. And sometimes we even don't want to be fed by them. Too often self-identified Christians have quite strong convictions on what to believe and how to live. "Just leave me be!"

We had an acquaintance in Tanunda. She certainly considered herself a Christian. Isn't everyone in Barossa a Christian?! But then she wasn't very much into the Church stuff. Christmas was a good time to show up ... regularly.

She would declare: "I just don't want to go there so that someone would preach to me!" So that someone would preach to me! What she meant was that she didn't want to hear any warnings, any teaching, be it related to spiritual dangers from the world, or our own sinfulness. "I don't want anyone to preach to me! I know better!" And the uncomfortable truth is... there is such a person living in all of us.

But now let's reflect on how this impacts you directly. Let's reflect on this other aspect of what Ezekiel tells us. It is not just about those "professional" watchmen, about pastors, who get in trouble, to some extent we all are in similar situations. Yes, every Christian. You too. Think about our families!

About our extended families. About our friends and colleagues. We all are called to be watchmen to them. And I guess that most of you have been in situations where you see that something is going wrong, you can see the spiritual danger lurking.

You know that you need to warn your loved ones, but ... you feel uneasy about what may happen if you do. What to say? How will they react? And... we go silent. And... we feel guilty about it. Be encouraged by what the Lord says:

"If I say to the wicked, O wicked one, you shall surely die, and... if you [do] warn the wicked to turn from his way, and he does not turn from his way, that person shall die in his iniquity, but you will have delivered your soul." Hear this. The Lord doesn't expect us to change others, only to deliver His message. To be faithful.

Finally, two things that will help us to rejoice even in the midst of trouble. I hope they will help us to appreciate our watchmen and to be watchmen. First is "who" and the second is "why". Who and why. Who sends the watchmen to you and you as a watchman, and why He does it.

First, think again about *who* sends those watchmen to you and you as a watchman to others? Are those our initiatives? Who is the one who sends? You know the answer. It is God who is your loving Father in heaven, yes, He does it.

He sends Jesus, His true Son, and Jesus calls, equips and sends us. On our own, without the help of the Holy Spirit we could not even discern what is dangerous and what is not, all of that is possible only thanks to God's gracious instructions. So let us be grateful whenever God sends His watchmen to us, and let's rejoice when He sends us to warn others. What a privilege it is!

Second, *why* does He do that? Why does God send His watchmen to us and us to others? Does He want to annoy and upset us? To invade our otherwise peaceful and carefree life? To make us feel uncomfortable? What is His motivation? You know...

Because He cares for us. He cares for you. And for everyone in your life. He knows that there are things that can kill our bodies, and there are things that can kill our souls. False teachings, pressures from society and devilish lies that attack our faith from outside. Lukewarmness, indifference, complacency that attack our faith from inside.

If we are not warned, if we don't see these dangers, we may lose the most precious gift of eternal life. Jesus doesn't want that to happen. He has already paid the highest price to free you. He prays days and nights for your salvations, for your protection.

He searches for and sends watchmen in our lives, to each one of you. Because you, and your fate matter to Him. And He sends us to others, for their fate matters to Him as well. He wants to warn us. He has no pleasure if the wicked perishes.

Besides, He knows our weaknesses. He knows our fears and uncertainties, and our rebellious thoughts. He knows how we are tempted. He knows everything and there is nothing that He couldn't relate to. For He has become one of us. He was exposed to all spiritual dangers and was tempted just like you are.

This is why He speaks to you with words of encouragement and sends you with this message to others: "I know it may be difficult to hear the truth of spiritual dangers, it may rob you of your peace, and I know how difficult it may be to speak the truth.

I know of your fears of losing loved ones if you remain faithful to me, and I know how disheartened you are when you fail. I know all of that. Remember, I was rejected by my own family, by my own people, by my religious leaders, I was abandoned by those I loved the most. I know all your worries. Cast them on me, for I do care for you!

I know when you ignore my warnings. I know when you fail to warn others. I know. Turn to me... I do forgive you. I want you to live. And know this, when you struggle, I am near to you to give you strength and courage and wisdom. And, remember, I can bless you even in situations which seem hopeless.

Trust me! Listen to me! Let me be your God, let me do the worrying. Let me do the heavy lifting. Listen to me, listen to my watchmen, be my watchmen! For I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turns from his way and live.

Keep turning to me and help me turning others as well, so that they too can live." That's Jesus' message to us. Listen to His watchmen! Be His watchman!

And rejoice even in trouble!

Amen.