

## "What Does God Expects of Us?"

Ezekiel 33:1-11; Luke 13:1-9

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

March 9, 2014 – 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday in Lent – Rev. Ronald Botts

In a sense the Old Testament prophets were Israel's early warning system. These holy watchmen alerted the people and admonished them when necessary. The prophet most identified in this role was Ezekiel, who lived in the 6th century B.C.

The watchman is a figure taken from military life. He was a soldier charged with raising an alarm in the event of attack. Similarly in ancient times there would often be a watchman on guard over a city, usually situated in a high tower. His duty was likewise to warn of danger.

Ezekiel's words— our OT scripture today— have a dual purpose. They not only address the person being warned, but are also directed to the person responsible to give the warning. There is an expectation here for both parties.

If the watchman gives an alarm, and the people don't pay attention to it, then it isn't his fault. He is absolved of any blame for the failure of others to heed the warning. If, on the other hand, he falls down on his duty and fails to provide a warning when needed, the responsibility falls squarely on his shoulders. He would be held responsible fully for his negligence. Obviously watchmen didn't last long if they weren't diligent.

God equates the prophet's charge with that of the sentinel. Ezekiel is to be the watchman for the house of Israel. He is to take the Lord's message to the people. It will be a word of warning, an unpleasant message which the people will not want to receive. If the people will not listen, then Ezekiel will not be held responsible; yet if he fails to bring the warning, the fault will lie with him.

Everywhere in modern life we seem to be surrounded by warnings of one kind or another. The Surgeon General warns us that smoking may be detrimental to our health. The flashing red lights warn that a train is about to cross. Teachers send out warnings on failing students. Employers warn unproductive workers. Your body sends you warnings through ulcers and headaches. The environment gives us warnings that our world is becoming dangerously polluted.

We have a responsibility to heed these warnings. As it says in Ezekiel, "If anyone who hears the sound of the trumpet does not take warning, and the sword comes and takes him away, his blood shall be upon his own head. But if he had taken warning, he would have saved his life." So, we are told, if we foolishly ignore these important messages then we have only ourselves to blame.

On the night of April 14, 1912, the sleek ocean liner *Titanic* was halfway across the Atlantic on her maiden voyage. This was not just another ship, but truly a floating palace which had been advertised as impregnable and unsinkable. Advertisement touted that thousands of people could be transported majestically across the ocean and hardly even feel the motion.

What nobody seemed to take into account that fateful evening was the danger that lurked ahead in the form of icebergs. This possibility certainly fell on deaf ears, especially when it came to the ship's radio operators. Five times within two hours the *Titanic* had received crucial transmissions from other vessels. Finally a nearby ship, the *Californian*, made one last attempt to warn them of impending danger.

The *Titanic* refused to acknowledge the *Californian*, however. Finally an angry reply went out from radio room of the luxury liner, "Shut up, I am busy." Within a few minutes the mighty *Titanic*, pride of the seas, struck an iceberg; and within four hours, fifteen hundred people perished. And yet it was a tragedy that perhaps didn't have to occur.

You see the telegraphers on the *Titanic* were too occupied with another matter: the highly profitable business of sending and receiving passenger telegrams. Besides, what did it matter? Nothing could happen to this ship. Why be concerned?

The warning signals were ignored until the ship crashed into a mountain of ice, but then it was too late except to send out an SOS. Those who received the messages of warning and failed to heed them have a special responsibility in this tragedy.

"Don't bother me. I'm busy with something else." How often do we say or imply that when some important message tries to get through to us? "I can't deal with this now; go away." We're masters at ignoring the essential while continuing on with the trivial.

In a sense Jesus himself is the watchman figure in our Gospel today when he tells about a man who had a fig tree planted in a vineyard. The man examined it for fruit but found none. So he said to his gardener, "For three years I have come looking for fruit... and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?" The gardener pleads with the landowner to give him a little more time to fertilize and work with the tree. The master replies, "If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down [then]."

In the section that immediately precedes these verses Jesus stresses the need to repent or suffer the inevitable consequences. Israel has been a rebellious people. They stand to face judgment for the result of their actions and also for the consequence of their inaction. Repeatedly throughout the years Israel had failed to live up to its covenant with God and, moreover, didn't even recognize the error of its ways.

While we today may not identify with ancient Israel, there is a connection here: God has expectations of people commensurate with what has been given them. The more we receive, as individuals or collectively, the more that is anticipated in return. Jesus reminds us there is an accountability. He gives us fair warning that God sees through the positive spin we may put on our actions or failures. A time of reckoning may be closer than we think.

This text is both difficult to preach and to hear. We neither like to sound a warning or receive it. We find it troubling to reflect deeply on ourselves and on our inadequacies in relationship to God. Yet, it takes looking inward to come to a frank assessment of how we're doing in our lives. We are reminded, too, that life is both fragile and short, that our circumstances can change quickly, and so there is always a measure of urgency when it comes to such matters.

The same holds true for a church as it does for an individual. A faith community is accountable as well. We may look like a church because we have a building and hold services and direct some of our resources to the needy, but we must consider regularly whether we're living up to our gifts and potential. Are we truly putting God at the center of our congregation, or is this really about us? Rarely do churches engage in this kind of conversation. Maybe we're afraid of the outcome.

What does God expect of us? What did Jesus tell us we should do? He uses the word **repent** over and over again as the action we are to take. This means to acknowledge our limitations and realize the rightful place of our Creator. It means to center our lives around God and God's will, and not ourselves and our will. It means to turn ourselves from self-centered to other-centered.

For the most part we resist the whole idea of repentance, and especially as it might apply to us. We tend to associate it with fundamental, evangelical churches. We connect it with altar calls and Billy Graham crusades. We think of it being intended for truly evil people who obviously need to have a change of heart and a change of behavior.

For the most part we don't really consider that it has much to do with us. After all, we're not bad people as people go. We don't steal from our neighbors, cheat in our dealings with others, assault our friends and family. No, we may not be bad as people go, but... are we truly as good as Christ would have us be?

Do we love our enemies and respect those who don't us? Do we pray for those who do us wrong? Do we lend and expect no advantage in return? Do we refrain from judging others and forgive even when people have acted against us? Do we actually do unto others as we would have them do unto us? Do we not only resist doing harm, but actively seek to do good? These are all things Jesus lifts up as his way.

Warnings have a way of being ignored but, when they are discounted, the full danger of the obstructions ahead may go unrecognized. We can be too busy with this or that to look carefully at our personal lives. We can be too consumed with activities to look critically at our church. The problem is that when there is no awareness, no adjustments are possible. A Chinese proverb says it well, "If we don't change our direction, we'll end up where we're headed."

Jesus tells us—no he **warns** us—to do what is necessary before it is too late. And that covers a lot of territory. It's a challenging message to hear; moreover, it requires a response from us. Jesus instructs us, with love and concern, to be aware of our failings and to make the necessary adjustments.

Like the fig tree of the parable, he gives us yet another opportunity to take the warning seriously, to make amends, to ask forgiveness for our sins, and to live and grow as God intends. There is accountability, but not without support.

Now to those here who are already perfect, you may ignore today's warning. All others, listen up!