

To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father -- to him be glory and power for ever and ever. (Revelation 1:5-7)

Dear fellow redeemed,

How many of you'd be willing to spend the night as a lookout up in a crow's nest? Ya know before the invention of radar and sonar and all the wonderful radio communications we have nowadays – someone had to climb up to the top of those ships that would sail across the oceans. And I can't imagine that job being much fun. All alone, always looking for danger... sandbars... icebergs... hoping no one falls overboard. I guess someone had to do it, but I don't know that I'd have liked being a lookout, a watchman, up in one of those crow's nests. I guess it's a good thing I was never a sailor living back in those days, 'cuz I'm guessing if you were up for duty in the crow's nest you didn't have much of a choice. You just had to get to work. Lives depended on it.

I think it's easy for us to get sick of being watchmen. And no, obviously I'm not talking about sitting on top of a ship looking for icebergs. If only it were that easy... You see, you and I, we've been called on to be lookouts, to be watchmen. And you'd better believe that lives depend on the work we do. And we're not just talking about life and death here – we're talking about *eternal* life and death. When it comes to being Christians we don't have a choice. We can't sit on the sidelines when we see that our brothers and sisters in the faith are stuck in a sin... drifting toward spiritual danger and death. And we can't remain silent either when our fellow believers have fallen overboard and need that precious gospel lifeline to lift them out of their despair.

In the First lesson today, we heard God call on his appointed watchman, Ezekiel, to speak His Word to His people. And our Lord is asking the same of you today. You are his watchmen, and he's asking you to speak. So, **Speak, Watchmen! Speak!** Use God's Word to Warn the Wicked and reach out with God's good news as you Comfort the Afflicted.

When the prophet Ezekiel was told by the Lord that he was being appointed as a watchman over his fellow countrymen, it was a bad time to be an Israelite. You see, Ezekiel had been taken captive, along with many other Israelites, when the Babylonians began to deport those living in Jerusalem. And during his ministry while in exile in Babylon he was called on by God to preach repentance to people who had messed up their lives with their own sins. The people of Israel had turned away from God and turned after their own wicked ways, and because of this God gave them a wake-up call. They were ripped out of the land they lived in... separated from the people they loved... even the temple of the Lord would be destroyed.

You see, God was sick of his people bringing him half-hearted offerings. He was tired of watching them go through the motions, while on the inside they were rotting away. God didn't want some mindless adherence to the sacrificial system... he didn't want a people who confessed him with their lips and denied him with their lifestyles. No, he wanted heartfelt sacrifice and thankful offerings. King David spoke about the kind of sacrifices God was looking for in Psalm 51 when he wrote: **The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise (Psalm 51:17).**

But the Lord didn't see humble and remorseful people. He saw people who, despite their troubles, continued to hold on to their sinful lifestyles. He saw people who had grown comfortable with allowing certain evils to become a part of their lives. He saw his people walking down the spiritual train tracks with hell's steam engine barreling down on them. So, he told Ezekiel to get to work: **Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel; so hear the word I speak and give them warning from me.** God didn't just sit back and watch them "get what they deserved" – no, he sent them a watchman who would warn them of the grave danger they were in.

In fact, Ezekiel was told if he didn't warn the people about the danger of their sin, he was going to be held accountable for their blood. Being a watchman comes with some pretty heavy responsibility. Lives are in the balance. Ezekiel needed to speak up. 'Cuz if he didn't, well, that was a sin that was just as damnable in God's eyes as anything that the rest of the people were doing.

If I woke up in the middle of the night and saw the house next door to me on fire what'd ya think I'd do? Well, if it was late, I'd probably just close the blinds and go back to sleep right? I mean, I don't want to bother my neighbor so late at night. Plus, my bed is feeling pretty comfortable, and I don't really feel like going over there and getting involved... If I ever tried pulling something like that you wouldn't just label me as loveless and cold... you'd call me a killer, right!?

God has called you and me to be his watchmen. He's called us to warn fellow Christians when they are wandering into the danger of sin. Jesus laid it out so clearly in the Gospel lesson, didn't he? **If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you... if he will not listen, take one or two others along... If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church.** This is not rocket science here, there's no training course needed to confront those who have sinned. So it should be pretty easy to go and talk about sin openly with your fellow Christians, right?

Being a watchman, being your brother's keeper, is not always an easy job, is it? Why? Well, because unlike your neighbor next door in the burning house your brother or sister may not be quite so grateful when you warn them about how they are living. Your husband may not appreciate that encouragement to attend worship more often. Your son or daughter may not really be interested when you advise them of the dangers of living together outside of marriage with their boyfriend or girlfriend. But what's the alternative? I mean, are you going to sit back and watch them burn? Watch as their pet sins destroy their faith and consume their souls? If you fail to warn them, fail to speak out, you're not just being loveless and cold... God says you're a killer. **When I say to the wicked, 'O wicked man, you will surely die,' and you do not speak out to dissuade him from his ways, that wicked man will die for his sin, and I will hold you accountable for his blood.**

That's pretty sobering isn't it? God doesn't mince words here. He tells it like it is, if you fail to warn your fellow Christians who are living in unrepentant sin – you are just as guilty before God as they are. Now I don't know about you, but when I hear those words of our God – **I will hold you accountable for his blood** – that makes me nervous. Because I know how often I have failed to speak out God's warnings. I have failed to speak them to myself, to my family, to my friends... and I know all the excuses – “he won't listen anyways” or “I wouldn't know what to say” or “It's none of my business” – I know all those excuses ring empty before God. And because of my failure to speak at times, I too will often feel like the people of Israel, who said in our text: **“Our offenses and sins weigh us down, and we are wasting away because of them. How then can we live?”**

And it is for this very reason that we need to begin our work as God's watchmen listening to, and taking into our own hearts first, that final verse from our text today. **‘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, O house of Israel?’** Did you notice God's beautiful answer to the question that comes from the heart of a sinner crushed by God's law and weighed down with guilt? When we ask that question – **How then can we live?** – we find our God pointing us to himself. “How can *you* live!? How can *you* go on after all of the times you've fallen short, all of the times you have fallen asleep on the job, all the times you've failed to heed My Words of warning!? You can live because *I live!* You can go on because I have no desire to see you suffer, to see you die in your sins... in fact just the opposite! I desire always and only for each and every one of you to turn to me live.”

And we know that our God does not talk a big game and then fail to deliver. No, he backed up his promise to Ezekiel, to Israel, to you and to me when he sent his Son to this earth to take our place. Jesus always spoke warning when he needed to. And he always set troubled souls at ease with the message that there was peace between sinners and God, peace that he would secure as he bled and died on the cross. As he gave up his life so that we could live. Peace that we know will never end, because our risen Lord Jesus is alive, and so we will live forever.

What a message of comfort! This is the message that God has given you. Take it to heart. Live every day motivated by this truth, this truth that God has freed you from sin and shame, this truth that you are precious in his eyes. And share it with your brothers, with your sisters in Christ, who are weighed down by the burden of *their* sins. When Jesus says in today's Gospel, "**show your brother his fault,**" the purpose is always the same: to win your brother over. The law of God is a necessary tool to point out danger and expose sin for what it truly is. But if we fail to use the gospel to heal souls crushed by the law we are not just being cold and unloving... we are killers.

In 2001 there was a pharmacist in Kansas City who was found to be diluting cancer treatment drugs so he could make a better profit. He ended up getting a 30 year jail sentence. This man held life saving power in his hands, but for the sake of personal gain he diluted it to the point where it could no longer help people.

Do we ever do the same with God's life saving gospel? Sometimes when we catch a fellow Christian in a sin, we like to rub their noses in it a bit, don't we? We like to let God's crushing law linger so that child will listen better next time, or so that our spouse gets dropped down a peg or two. But when God's law has done the work of convicting a sinner, so that he acknowledges his wrong and is now in desperate need of that life saving medicine of the gospel – how could we ever withhold it from those in need.

Jesus has never withheld his forgiveness from broken sinners. He forgave Ezekiel for the times he failed as a watchman, he forgave the people of Israel for turning their backs on God's ways, and he says the same thing to you that he said to them: "Your sins are forgiven. Not because of anything in you, but because of me." May we never fail to comfort the afflicted with those beautiful words, those life giving words: Your sins are forgiven. Because finally only the gospel, only the peace of forgiveness in Christ, is what will comfort the afflicted and motivate hearts to turn away from sin and toward a God who offers life. God grant you strength, my fellow watchmen, as you speak His life saving Word to those in need. Amen.

May the Lord our God be with us as he was with our fathers; may he never leave or forsake us. May he turn our hearts to him, to walk in all his ways. (1 Kg 8:57)