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Proper 18 • Ezekiel 33:7–9 • September 7, 2014

David Wollenburg

Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, WollenburgD@csl.edu

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I actually cringe every time I encounter this text. It isn't that I don't like it, or don't understand what is being said. It is, rather, that the message is too clear. It is God's warning, repeated time and again, that we ignore his word to our own peril. And it isn't just for us preachers; it is for all of God's people.

And then I read the headlines of the day and see how bad things are in this world, and I become even more concerned. In Jeremiah the Lord says it this way,

I set watchmen over you, saying, "Pay attention to the sound of the trumpet!" But they said, "We will not pay attention." Therefore hear, O nations, and know, O congregation, what will happen to them. Hear, O earth; behold, I am bringing disaster upon this people, the fruit of their devices, because they have not paid attention to my words; and as for my law, they have rejected it. (Jer 6:17-19)

But we haven't paid attention to the trumpet—or if we have we interpreted it as a trumpet of triumph, not the trumpet of warning as it is portrayed the Scriptures.

We have been called to be watchmen over God's people. "Son of man," the Lord said to Ezekiel at the time of his call in chapter 3: "I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel. Whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me" (3:17). That same message is repeated here.

But notice—Ezekiel isn't expected to save the entire nation; he is expected to rescue individuals. And that is where the application becomes personal and where I begin to find comfort. Ezekiel, while he was called to preach to all the people, had a

particular focus, as does our call. Ezekiel's call is to be a personal soul winner, one who reclaims sinners for true life in the society of God's people, and that is our call as well, "Go and make disciples of all nations" (Mt 28:19).

That is the force, also, of Jesus's words in today's gospel lesson from Matthew 18.

Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me . . . If a man has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? And if he finds it, truly, I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. (vv. 5, 12–13)

Today as we are called to be personal soul winners, we are called to joy, the joy of sharing the message of Jesus's death and resurrection with others. We sometimes forget that. We become all tied up in our own trials and tribulations, or we become so concerned about all the evil in this world today that we are almost led to despair. But then we remember the words of the psalmist in Psalm 32 and remember that our sins are forgiven and we are blessed.

Ezekiel's name means, "God strengthens," or "strengthened by God" and so are we all by the power of God's Holy Spirit. In the chapter that follows our text for today Ezekiel points us to the Messiah as the true Shepherd who will deliver and feed his flock (34:11–31), in Jesus we know that that has happened and continues to happen yet today.

Baptized into Christ, called by his name, we pray for the grace to know and continue to share the promises of his kingdom. Regardless of what may happen we have one task—to "preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching" (2 Tm 4:2).

May God grant us the grace to do just that, Amen.