

Sermon for the Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost September 10, 2023 jj
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✠ sdg ✠

Before Covid, I had only heard the term, “essential personnel” in one situation, and that was back when I lived in Kansas City. When there was a snowed-out day, schools were closed, businesses opened later than usual, and cars without chains that got themselves stuck on the slick road were ticketed for violating the city’s weather emergency rules, in addition to their unwelcome tow and repair bills. But on the local TV news, in the little crawl at the bottom of the screen, certain institutions like hospitals, nonprofits and churches posted one exception while everyone else was settling in for a comfy snow-day spent at home: “essential personnel only.” They knew who they were, they did the jobs that needed to be done, rain or shine, snow or sun. There’s probably something similar when we prepare in our area for a hurricane to make landfall- that’s when you need the essential workers. They weren’t the glamorous, talented, or necessarily highest paying jobs, but they had the assurance that they were essential. You couldn’t do without them. In the past couple years, we’ve heard that classification of essential a lot, and now it has started to mean just about anything!

In Ezekiel’s day, about 500 years before Christ, there was one essential worker in particular that everyone knew was important and had earned the title for sure: the watchman. Like many genuinely essential jobs, their everyday importance was often overlooked; the watchman most days was ignored. He had a boring job when there was little to no threats on the horizon. But when an enemy attacked, nothing is more important than hearing that warning from the watchman. You ignore that warning to your own peril. His urgent message and your immediate response are absolutely essential. He had to take his own job seriously, too, because if he neglected his duties and the enemy attacked—the responsibility, with all its

painful consequences, would land severely on the watchman’s head.

It was no accident or mistake that the Lord God addressed His prophet Ezekiel as a watchman for the house of Israel. No, he wasn’t going to climb a city wall and gaze out to the horizon for intruders. The people among whom Ezekiel lived were actually removed from their home and from their holy city Jerusalem and most importantly, the Temple was destroyed, burned to the ground and the irreplaceable golden and bronze fixtures were carried off by the Babylonian army. In the physical sense, these people had nothing more left to protect with an ordinary watchman. There was on the contrary a spiritual enemy that was threatening them, and the only watchman’s warning they would hear from Ezekiel was a spiritual message of urgent repentance straight from their hearts, rather than some outward preparations done with their hands. God could have chosen any of a number of ways to get His message across to the people He had chosen. He decided to designate a son of man, Ezekiel the man from a priestly family, to bear the Word to his fellow Israelites in this essential official job. Like the Jerusalem watchman, Ezekiel was required to remain vigilant, even during those times when it appeared that God was as far away as the familiar Judean landscape. When you’re used to hills and mountains all over in your backdrop, then a vast, flat agricultural plain in between two rivers seems to be the farthest thing from home. People were becoming swayed by the feeling that God had nothing more to do with them now that they lived in Babylon.

However, God was not absent. He had in mind to bring His people back to the Promised Land. He also had the additional promise of a Savior, another Son of Man, Jesus who would be born in Bethlehem, raised in Nazareth, would preach

for three years in Galilee and be crucified and raised over the course of three days in the rebuilt Jerusalem. Ezekiel's watchman message of repentance and renewed faith in the Lord of Hosts was essential for those who may never have made it back to see Palestine with their own eyes, but would finally close their eyes with confident faith that the future Messiah would set them free from their sins and give them eternal life and rescue from the attacks of the old Evil Foe.

The watchman message of repentance and renewed faith in Christ is essential for us today, including our crazy, Covid-affected world of this is essential and that is newly essential, but so few seem to know what is truly and absolutely necessary for everlasting life. It's easy at times for us to ignore the familiar story of salvation, and tempting for us to hunker down for the stormy hurricane that is our contemporary world around us, keep calm and carry on, doing what feels right for us, despite what God says This is what I have in mind for you. In terms of what we read today from Matthew 18, when a family member or fellow Christian hurts you, your preference is to fight back, defend yourself, rather than go out of your way to achieve reconciliation with a brother who needs to be gained back rather than defeated. You need a watchman, a preacher who is vigilant over your soul, responsible even before the mighty throne of God Himself to give you not only all the warnings of the Law, but also to announce to you the sweetest Gospel comfort that Jesus has paid in full for your entry into the Father's eternal kingdom.

Jesus is your true watchman, the only truly reliable protector whom you can trust whenever you are attacked by the devil and his allies in this evil world. Whenever you feel like you are exiled from the loving, gracious face of your Creator, Jesus assures you that He is with you. The abandonment was not yours to endure, but His, when He said on the Cross, My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me? He even

sends you today His own loyal angels to guard you in all your ways, to remind you that you are His precious child. He feeds you His very own Body and Blood as a Promise and assurance that you are essential to Him, and that His blood-bought forgiveness is yours permanently, no matter what you may face in the rest of your life here on this earth.

Our confused, turned-around world is never going to get it right when it comes to what is essential and what is not. All the world knows is advice like, "If your brother sins against you, tell everyone who sees your Facebook and social media pages that he is a dirty rotten scoundrel and then block every attempt they make to contact you and try to apologize." You know where to turn, and it is your watchman who gives you God's Word who will dependably set your gaze on the true horizon, that is, the life of the world to come. The devil will never cease to attack and his tactics are ever so subtle and tantalizing, but you have nothing to fear. Jesus your watchman has not only spotted the Enemy, not only has He warned you to follow what authorities say in His stead, but He has most importantly defeated sin, death and Satan. Nothing is more essential to the Church than the promise of your Savior, that where two or three are gathered in His name, He is here to grant you His most lavish gifts and the assurance of eternal life.

In the Name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.