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“The Storm Shelter of Forgiveness”
Text: Ezekiel 33:7-9; Matthew 18:1-20

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Well, unless you've been living under a rock or in a monastery without electricity, you've heard **the warnings**. Two weeks ago Harvey was coming. This week it was Irma. These storms have captured the attention and concern of the nation, have filled the newscasts, and are the topic of many conversations. For those in Florida, evacuations were ordered and all kinds of special precautions were taken ahead of these storms. All to one end: to protect and preserve life.

But not just these past couple of weeks. Warnings are issued all the time. If you live in the midwest, you get tornado warnings. Here, in the summer time, we get severe thunderstorm warnings. We've had blizzard warnings in the winter. The weather service and the authorities don't do these things just to scare us they do it so we will live. So that we don't lose our life when the loss could have been prevented. All so that we will live and not die.

That's what God wants, too. ***Give them warning from me***, God told the prophet Ezekiel. ***Give them warning from me*** of their sin, of their iniquity. Not because God and the prophets - or the Church today - just want people to obey and do what they say and be good, but so we will live. So that we will live and not die.

This week, satellites have shown us amazing pictures of Irma and how big and threatening that storm is. Without those pictures it would be hard for us to imagine the magnitude of the storm and the havoc it could cause. Yet even with those pictures, some people choose to ignore the warnings. Some because they think they have no choice. Some because they don't believe the warnings. Some because they think they can beat it - they think they're strong enough and smart enough to ride out the storm. And sometimes those people do make it through; but sometimes they don't. Sometimes, sadly, they lose their lives.

Give them warning from me, God says. From where we are, perhaps we don't see the destructive power of sin. But God does. From His throne on high He sees the magnitude of the problem and the threat to our life. The day before a storm hits may be sunny and nice. And maybe your life too. But then one day the sin comes lashing out from you

against your neighbor or your neighbor against you. But even if it doesn't, the sin in you and in your heart is doing its destructive work. Eating away at your faith toward God and eroding your love toward others. So ***give them warning from me***, God says. So they know. That even if you can't see it, the sin is already there; the danger is real. ***Give them warning from me***, God says. So they will live and not die.

Yet just as with the weather, many don't listen. Some don't believe the warnings. Some think there's more important things to worry about in life than this. Some think they have no choice but to sin. Others may think the threat exaggerated, or that they're strong enough to overcome it. But unlike with the weather, sin has a 100% success rate, a 100% casualty rate. 100% of the people in this world die because of sin. Some sooner, some later. Some younger, some older. Some suddenly, some slowly. So ***give them warning from me***, God says. Of what I see. Of the danger they're in. So that they live.

Warn them, Jesus would later tell His disciples, that, in fact, the danger is so real that it's better, it's *preferable*, to lose your hand, your foot, or your eye now than to lose your life for eternity. It's better, it's *preferable*, to have ***a great millstone fastened around [your] neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea***, than to cause one of God's little ones to sin. Clearly, if those things are better, *preferable*, then sin - no matter how it seems to us, no matter how many other things seem more important in our lives right now - is no small, harmless thing.

So ***give them warning from me***, God says. So they can receive my forgiveness, be rescued from the danger, and have life.

You see, that's what God wants. And perhaps we could even say that all God wants. He wants to keep you safe and protect you. He wants to forgive you and rescue you. He wants to give you life and have you live with Him forever. *Everything* that God does is for this. The commandments? For this. The apostles and prophets? For this. Church? For this. Discipline? For this. That your sin be washed in His forgiveness and your death overcome by His life. That you live.

That's the kind of God you have. He sends angels to guard and protect you. He ***leaves the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one who has gone astray***. He even put the millstone of your sin around the neck of His Son, who then gave His hands and feet and eyes and His very life on the cross - in your place - so that you can live. For it is not the will of God that any should perish. That's the kind of God you have.

If you or someone that you know doesn't know that, or doesn't think that's true, or doubts that or forgets that, or at times thinks of God in some other way - even long-time and life-long Christians - that's evidence of the power and danger of sin in your heart and life. That gets you to think of God not as a life-giving Father, but whose rules and commandments are taking your life away from you. That gets you to think of God as

unreasonable and demanding. Or, that gets you to think that you have to do x, y, and z to earn God's love and make you worthy of His forgiveness. That makes you think you have defend your life against God rather than find your life in Him.

No. More than anything else in the world, God wants to forgive you and give you His life. Everything He does is for that. That forgiveness be a way of life for you. Forgiveness received and forgiveness given. Forgiveness washed upon you, spoken to you, and eaten by you. That you live and not die. That you live not in fear of death, but that, as one of our hymns puts it: *Teach me to live that I may dread the grave as little as my bed* (LSB #883 v.3). To live confident and secure no matter what comes in this world and life. To live confident and secure that as a child of God, you are great in the kingdom of heaven. You already are. You are great in your Father's eyes. Or as it says elsewhere in the Scriptures, *the apple of His eye* (cf. Deut 32:10; Psalm 17:8).

Do you think of yourself that way? Do you think of others that way? If you did, how would that change how you think of yourself and how you think of others? Would it change how you live? Would it change how you treat others? I would say: *how could it not?*

So for this reason, God made Ezekiel *a watchman for the house of Israel*. A watchman was someone who would stand on top of the wall of a city and cry out when an enemy was approaching, warning and sounding the alarm. But not only that - a watchman would also announce the return of the army from battle, to call the city to rejoice in a victory won. And so would Ezekiel do both, and be a watchman for forgiveness. To warn Israel of their sin, but also teach them of and point them to their forgiving God - their God who wins the victory for them and more than anything in the world wants to give that victory - His forgiveness and life - to them. Tell them that, Ezekiel! Warn them and joy them!

And in the same way has God has made pastors watchmen for their congregations. Watchmen for forgiveness. To warn against sin and point to our forgiving God - our God who more than anything in the world wants to forgive you and give you life. Who wants to wash you and feed you and speak to you and care for you. To announce His cross of life for the world.

And so has God made you watchmen, too - in *your* places. In your home, among friends, wherever you are. Watchmen of forgiveness, for our God who wants more than anything in the world to forgive all people and give them His life. That might mean warning them of the enemy, the life-stealing sin in our lives; but always to give them life-giving forgiveness. To point to them to Jesus and give them Jesus. To give them their Saviour. To give them His love. To give them the joy of living as His children, *the apple of His eye*.

This is forgiveness as a way of life. Not something that is in our lives sometimes and not

sometimes, but defines who we are, how we think, and how we live. That neither our problems *nor* our successes define us or change us; that neither hurricanes and stormy weather nor fair weather dictate how we live - but that we live always confident and secure in Christ. In His love and forgiveness and life. That whatever comes and goes - including hurricanes - we know He does not. He is the constant in our lives and in an ever-changing world.

And so we live in Him and His love. And then when help is needed, we help. When warning is needed, we warn. When love is needed, we love. When prayer is needed, we pray. And when forgiveness is needed, we forgive. That's who you are. Confident. Secure. In Christ.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.