

<i>Date Preached</i>	06-Sept-2020	<i>Date Initiated</i>	23-Aug-2020
<i>Where Preached</i>	SAK	<i>Appointed Readings</i>	Yr A, Pr 18 (Tr 2)
<i>Main Text</i>			

" You, mortal, I have made a sentinel for the house of Israel. "



"Sentinel." It is not a word we have occasion to use very much in everyday speech. Perhaps in the military, where a sentinel (or, more commonly, a sentry) may be posted at the perimeter or entrance to keep watch for the approach of the adversary. And in the field of public health, there is the concept of a "sentinel species," which can warn us of the presence of impending danger: The canary in the coal mine, whose sudden death may indicate the presence of carbon monoxide, is a primitive example. The sentinel's role is to perceive, for us, danger that we cannot perceive for ourselves and to warn us of its potential consequences. Thus, in our first lesson today, God does not make the prophet Ezekiel responsible for *correcting* the waywardness of God's people just before the fall of Jerusalem, but God does make him responsible for saying something about it ... to warn them, for God, that they are acting in ways that do not please God.

But in our own lives, serving as a sentinel for others sounds a bit strange, doesn't it? Since the Enlightenment, with its emphasis on individual liberty and autonomy—the value of every person's being able to make choices and decisions for her- or himself—we have, as a society, balked at the idea that how one person chooses to act ... as long as she doesn't harm anyone ... can or should be a matter in which others may have an interest: an interest to counsel or suggest; to correct or admonish. The sentinel's role rubs us the wrong way; feels like being a busy-body or, worse, holier-than-thou. And because we value our *own* autonomy, we often default to a live-and-let-live attitude with respect to others. But I am not so sure this is Jesus' message for those of us gathered together as Christ's body, the Church.

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Most likely, all of us can share a 'war story' or two about low points in the lives of the parishes we have been part of—with the exception of St Andrew's, of course! I myself have a small collection, but by far the worst is one from our home parish in New Jersey. A beloved rector unexpectedly announced his resignation one April, many years ago, and then left in May. He had almost singlehandedly revitalized a parish that the diocese had been ready to close, and now no one knew how we were going to survive. After several months of supply preachers, expectations were running high—maybe even a little giddy—as our interim rector arrived in August, having just signed a one-year contract.

By mid-September, however, that giddiness had turned bitter, even acrid. All manner of grumbling about the interim had arisen from various factions in the parish, but the final straw was an allegation that the interim's spouse had insulted and belittled the venerable members of the altar guild ... met by a counter-allegation that *they* had disrespected the *spouse* and called her a vile name. In a matter of days—and this was probably a sign of the already-fragile state of the parish's health—petitions were circulating, both demanding the interim's removal and endorsing her

ministry; calls were flying into the diocesan house, both excoriating her work and pleading for someone to come and silence her naysayers; private meetings were occurring in both camps, where passions were flamed and resentment was stoked. When we finally held a parish meeting, within minutes it devolved into name-calling, shouting and mutual demands for votes to declare the other side's position entirely wrong and out-of-order.

In the end, whole groups of members left the parish in anger and bitterness, literally never to be seen again; the interim was let go after several more painful months, but with deep financial repercussions for the parish; and the poisoned, partisan atmosphere spawned a search for a new rector that lasted more than three-and-a-half years. Sure, we'd all gotten a lot off our chests that autumn—we'd all has our say about what the parish needed and how it should be run. But in the end, where had any of that gotten us as a parish? as a family? How were we any better off—indeed, were we not far *worse* off—for having treated one another so harshly; judged one another so narrowly; and hardened our positions so rigidly?

Oh, how we could have used an Ezekiel, a sentinel: one person (or maybe a group of folks) who felt compelled by God to call a time-out ... to hold a mirror up to us and our destructive, self-centered behaviors ... and to point out that *all* of us ... on both sides of the divide ... were traveling a path God could not inconceivably be pleased with; that we needed to double back and set out afresh.

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The eighteenth chapter of St Matthew's Gospel is Jesus' discourse on the Church. Just before today's lesson He tells the parable of the good shepherd, who leaves ninety-nine sheep in the fold to go look for one that is lost: a lesson in the extravagant ... even unreasonable ... lengths we should go to, as church members, in caring for one another. And next week we will hear the parable of the evil servant: a lesson in paying forward the forgiveness we ourselves receive in Christ. Sandwiched between these two teachings is today's lesson about watching out for one another ... of serving as sentinels for each other. At first hearing, Jesus' words today may sound more like a mere procedural manual or checklist for church officers, but the truth is: Jesus isn't really much of a process guy; He's all about outcomes. Likewise, it seems inconsistent with Jesus' *overall* message of love and servanthood to place undue emphasis on the few words He says about excommunication—literally withholding the sacraments of grace—or what others may call shunning. This is to miss the aspirations He has for our serving as sentinels for one another: love, not reproach; restoration, not exclusion.

Jesus instructs members of His Church to point out—conscientiously, but also kindly and gently—one another's mis-steps and oversights; not to judge one another, but to help each member back to integrity in her or his relationship with Christ; not to silence or distance the wayward, but to re-integrate them into the community ... the family of God. When we seek, caringly and respectfully, to help our fellow disciples understand how their actions may be harming others, as well as themselves, we do not stifle their autonomy but underscore their membership and their value in our beloved community. And if, despite our best efforts, they will not listen to us ... when Matthew's Jesus tells us to treat them as "tax collectors" ... we are not being told to shun or eject them, but to *evangelize* them: to re-ignite in them the passion they once felt for Christ and let it lead their lives once again.

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Serving as sentinel for one another is sensitive business, and there can be a tendency—among both clergy and laity—to dictate or manipulate; even to shame or punish. Sometimes, we bark when we should whisper; push when a gentle nudge would suffice. Even ... *especially* ... when we act as sentinels for one another, Jesus' kindness and humility remain our touchstones.

But if we're attentive to these tendencies, our sentinel-ing for each other can help all of us, individually and collectively, grow in our Christian calling. We may do this by recognizing and gently intervening when some grow frustrated because others perceive risks or lack-of-safety in things that they don't perceive: when someone expresses a valid opinion or concern, but in unduly harsh language or tone; when someone—including clergy!—insists upon her or his own way despite the needs or desires of the wider community; when some leave others out, not in malice, but due to entrenched habit; or when all of us become a bit self-absorbed and forget to seek out the stranger just outside those [*gesture*] handsome front doors.

The true sentinel's objective isn't to shame or punish, but to call one another back to the fullest expression of Christ's love for us: as individuals, as a community and as a world. For as much grace is present when we openly and genuinely *receive* such reminders as when we gently but conscientiously *provide* them. And as this grace starts to flow and its various streams conjoin, there is no telling to what new places or unexpected distances it will carry us upon its swift, heavenward current.



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