

3 Easter – Year B – April 26, 2009
Acts 3:12-19; Psalm 4; 1 John 3:1-7; Luke 24:36b-48
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“Thereupon I awoke and looked, and my sleep was pleasant to me,” says the prophet Jeremiah (31:26). You and I know that it’s nothing less than amazing what a good night’s sleep can do! No one is exactly sure why sleep is so important, but we all know that we don’t function well without it. Sleep experts say that the average adult needs between seven and nine hours of sleep each night. Teens need as much as nine and a half hours of sleep. If you’re experiencing sleep disturbances like insomnia, waking up too early, not being able to get back to sleep, or waking up feeling entirely unrefreshed you are not alone. According to the National Sleep Foundation’s 2002, *Sleep in America* poll, fifty-eight percent of adults in this country reported at least one symptom of insomnia in the past year. Given the rising level of anxiety, especially in these times of financial uncertainty, my guess is that that number is even higher these days.

Our Psalmist knows about sleep. He writes a beautiful reminder of what God teaches us in the Word about the power of prayer and the futility of idolatry. The Psalm also tells of the blessings for the faithful, our need for repentance, and most of all about trusting in the Lord. In fact, this is not just the voice of wisdom speaking to us from the pages of time, but really great advice on how to joyfully take up our resurrection life right here, right now. Let’s take a closer look at the secrets behind why our Psalmist sleeps so peacefully at night.

“Answer me when I call, O God, defender of my cause; you set me free when I am hard-pressed; have mercy on me and hear my prayer.” The Psalmist is transparent about how he deals with people and situations that make him feel hard-pressed. He takes it to God in prayer. Our Psalmist boldly recommends the practice of prayer. He has received God’s mercy in the past, and given the nature of God, is again confident in God’s grace. What a great ‘first response’ to all of life’s circumstances.

In verse two, the Psalmist shares what seems to be an unconnected retort as if spoken by God. “You mortals, how long will you dishonor my glory; how long will you worship dumb idols and run after false gods?” We can understand this in at least two ways. This may be a reflection on why the Psalmist is calling for God’s mercy as he repents for his own sins. Or this may be a mirror of righteousness for those who are making our Psalmist feel hard-pressed. We have talked in our Bible studies about how hard it is to resist our own idols, and how difficult it can be to uphold Christian values. As the Psalmist attests, peer pressure is alive and well, and you and I are constantly pressured to conform to cultural norms and values.

The next three verses speak the truth of God’s gracious providential care for all who turn to Him in faith. The Psalmist again speaks of seeking God’s will in prayer. This time in contemplative prayer, where we ask God’s help in quieting our own voice, in order to discern God’s will in meditative silence. I recently met an interesting lady at the hospital, and we talked about prayer. Her story might sound familiar. She’d spent many hours in intercessory prayer on behalf of several people that she cared about, and felt betrayed by God when none of her prayers had been answered in the way she wanted God to answer them. Truly it *is* hard to accept God really cares for us when we see so many bad things happen to good people. Even Jesus spent a sleepless night in the Garden of Gethsemane praying to God, “Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done.” (Luke 22:42). In the Lord’s Prayer, we pray, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” Fortunately for us, God isn’t a cosmic vending machine programmed to respond to our every whim. In fact, we’d be in a lot of trouble if that was the case! Like Jesus’ own prayer, and the prayer He taught us, it is a measure of our humility before God’s glorious majesty, and our trust and faith in God that we pray “Thy will be done”.

The Psalmist then turns to the practice of offering sacrifice to God. In several of the Psalms we get a clearer picture of exactly what God means by sacrifice. A sacrifice of thanksgiving is one. A

contrite heart is another. An open ear to God is also mentioned in the Psalms. In the Book of Proverbs (21:3) we learn that, “To do righteousness and justice is more acceptable to the Lord than sacrifice.” In Paul’s letter to the Romans (12:1), we read, “by the mercies of God, ...present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.” Offering ourselves to God in all things is precisely what Jesus taught us about loving God and our neighbor, and being good stewards of God’s gifts. It recalls to mind our Baptismal covenant to be diligent in prayer, to work for justice and peace, honor the dignity of all people, and whenever we sin to repent and return to the Lord. Like the signature of our heartbeat, there is a pulse and rhythm to our living and active faith in the Lord. It’s manifest in all that we are and do now, and all that we are becoming and will do in the name of Christ Jesus our Lord. In other words, this is about practicing the hope, the joy, and the freedom of our resurrection life now. Transforming faith is like enlightened wakefulness, where the Holy Spirit enables you and me to trust in the Lord, and be fully alive in Christ, seeing the world through very different eyes.

A joyful outlook is like a hallmark of faith in God. The Psalmist says that his joy is made complete in God, and not in whether he has a good crop that year. Gladness, joy and happiness are all synonyms. For Christians the meaning is most perfectly found in relation to God, Jesus Christ and as the fruit of the Holy Spirit working in our lives. Unfortunately, the secular world uses the word ‘happiness’ as a measure of all kinds of things entirely unrelated to its deeper meaning in the source of all joy. The pervasive message of our culture is that our happiness and security lie in having more money, more stuff, a bigger car, a successful career, and so on and so on. Interestingly, it begs the question of our age – if happiness is directly proportional to material wealth, just how much *is* enough? The superficiality of instant gratification has also chained the word ‘happiness’ to nothing more than feeling good about ourselves or being in a good mood. On the other hand, the gladness that the Psalmist speaks of and the joy that is the fruit of the Holy Spirit are found in relationship. God is the source, and our relationships with God and one another are the joy of our living faith. The true gladness of your heart and mine is not affected by the changes and chances of life, because joy is one of the primary gifts of our being in Christ and being members of one another in the community of faith. This gladness and joy is the sure and certain knowledge of God’s steadfast love and faithfulness, and God’s abiding presence. There are no earthly circumstances or human feelings that can take away God’s love for us, or separate us from God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Jeremiah’s pleasant sleep comes after God’s promise of blessing, and right before God’s promise to make a new covenant with the house of Israel. The Paschal mystery is the revelation of God’s new covenant in Jesus our Lord. Our hope in Christ is rooted in His glorious resurrection, and fills our hearts with the joy of God’s eternal promise. God’s victory over sin and death is alive in us, and through us, in the world, as you and I prayerfully surrender more and more of our stress-filled lives to God with thanksgiving. The Psalmist has shared the secrets of a good night’s sleep. In this and in all the intentional practices of our lives in faith, let us proclaim with the Psalmist, “I lie down in peace; at once I fall asleep; for only you, Lord, make me dwell in safety.”

Amen.