

"Building, Watching, Sleeping: Blessing"

Psalm 127

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God gives sleep, says the psalm. "God grants sleep to those he loves." This is good news. We never tire of sleep. Kids moan to stay up; young people greet the new day with eyes still open; students push into wee, small hours getting a paper done. For all the ways and reasons we stay awake, in the end, we all succumb: sitting in desk chairs or crashed on a couch or in bed, heads limp on the pillow, we fall to unawareness of the world. When we wake we're glad for the shuteye. "God grants sleep to his beloved." This is undeniably good news.

The preacher recognizes the danger of a sermon that speaks of sleep. I've anticipated the jokes. But if sleep is God's gift, it must have to do with the gospel. If God gives what is good, and if, to his beloved, God gives sleep, why do people so often resist it? Why is it that experts recommend I get 7-9 hours a night, but I manage I the lower end of that only once a week? Do I not have time to receive God's gift?

Although, for many sleep isn't resisted but just hard to come by. My mom told me that when I was a newborn she wondered if a person could die from lack of sleep. I didn't know what she meant, and then I had children too. There are all kinds of reasons behind sleep deprivation: physiological, psychological, chemical issues. And then there's what the psalm speaks of: our vain insecurity.

"In vain you rise early
and stay up late,
toiling for food to eat...."

Or as in the English Standard Version,

"It is in vain that you rise up early
and go late to rest,
eating the bread of anxious toil...."

"The bread of anxious toil." Anxious bread. The way Christian faith understands things, we're less bread winners than we are bread receivers. We ask for bread as God gift every time we pray the Lord's Prayer. Work is God's gift as well. God put the first human in the Garden of Eden and told him "to work it and keep it" (Gen 2:15). The man, and then the woman, lived in paradise working and eating. We're not specifically told so, but I assume they slept well.

I have to think the sleep of Adam and Eve was the most satisfying kind. Sleep as after a day of good, fulfilling work. The kind of sleep that comes when the body is tired but the soul is content. Sleep unafraid of what tomorrow might bring, or whether they accomplished enough that day. Sleep without anxiety or guilt. No alarm clock. No troubled dreams. Unadulterated sleep from the hand of their Creator, for God grants sleep to those he loves. Being human means gladly receiving it.

Like all the psalms, 127th is prayer teaching us to be human. Since it's about being human after Adam and Eve decided they didn't trust God who told them, "Don't eat from that one tree," the psalm is about trouble and anxiety. When woman and man thought they knew better than God,

that they didn't need God's care in that word of instruction, they ate, and one of the consequences was a life of anxious toil.

The man received painful toil in work and the woman painful labor in childbirth. They were still workers in the image of God who worked creating the world. But as a consequence of their disobedience, work was no longer the joy God intended, but became an anxious thing. And their labor wouldn't always serve a purpose God loves.

We know how this is. We toil, but often not with God's purpose in mind. We work diligently, but also anxiously, fretting over the food on our plate, the roof over our head, the tuition money, gas money, grocery money, you-name-it money that can feel like it's all up to us to get. And so we rise early and stay up late, toiling not just for food, but also for fulfillment of our endless wants and needs. We sit down each night and eat our anxious bread. Pay bills with our anxious bucks. Stay awake with our anxious thoughts. This is true of people and families, and so it can be true of churches as well.

This is entirely understandable. There's no end to life's uncertainty and our inadequacy to meet what comes our way. We fret over a child stationed in Afghanistan; a parent whose health is failing; a seemingly unresolvable job situation. We strain our souls, our relationships, our prayer muscles, giving God our trouble while also thinking that our well-being is ours to obtain. Our church is our job to grow. Our problems are ours to solve. Our life is what we make of it, we think.

So we work our fingers to the bone trying to build a life that gives comfort, satisfaction, joy, peace, self-respect, meaning--what Scripture calls *shalom*--ever keeping watch for what might get us and those we love: the market, the government, an enemy, a storm, identity theft, something don't foresee. Imagine life a certain way and it can seem more threat than blessing.

If, in an honest moment, perhaps in the wee, small hours, with tense muscles and a pit on the stomach, you have asked what all is this for--all this effort and worry and trying to hold on. If you're feeling that now, or should you ever feel it someday, God would sing you a gospel lullaby.

That God would give sleep to those he loves is a sign that God has made us to live by grace. Not by our own effort alone, but by grace. Not by our own defense, but by grace. Not by obtaining for ourselves what we need but by the gifts God gives. God invites us to live out of the work and security of God.

Because the truth is, in the end, it doesn't matter how hard we labor if God's hand is not it. So, says the psalm: "Unless the Lord builds the house, the builders labor in vain." Whatever our vigilance in securing our lives, "unless the Lord watches over the city, the guards watch in vain."

Which is why, each night, God gives us the gospel as he invites us to sleep and we enter that place where we do not strive, our guard is down, and we just are. We are kept. The gospel is about how God is our keeper. God is the guardian of our souls and of our salvation, this one who attends to us to closely he numbers the hairs on our heads. God never slumbers or sleeps in his care over us, and when God joins our lives and our work to his, nothing of life is in vain.

God delights in us in the strength of our work, but maybe especially as we sleep. There's a special love for those asleep. A parent cracks a child's door before turning in and cradles the child in her eyes. Not cherishing the child for accomplishments or scorning him for shortfalls, but treasuring that one simply as God's dear creation--one for whom the Lord Jesus died, a child of God's own choosing. We are worth as much to God in our sleep as we are in our vigorous work. That is the gospel.

In my first years of ministry, when I found the person I went to visit in the hospital asleep I used to try and wake them up. I don't know how many people I afflicted with such pastoral care,

before realizing that waking a sleeper in the hospital was not effective ministry. It seemed a disturbance of something sacred, as though I was interrupting the tending of the God who watches over the city and who builds and restores our life.

Yes, God made us to be workers, builders, strivers, actors--life in God's image means all this. But those who live by grace remember that God's work, and not ours, is primary.

Yes, God made us to be watchful, observant, rational, on our guard for all kinds of trouble. But God didn't make us to know better than God, to be all sufficient like God, to be such guards of our lives that staying in life was all up to us. The security that truly matters isn't what we make for ourselves, but what God shelters us with.

Which might be why that crazy widow in the gospel lesson gave away her last two coins. Dropped them into the collection box of the Temple that Jesus knew would soon lie in a smoldering heap. But she gave all she had to live on, which seems a foolhardy thing to do, but Jesus commended her for it.

Jesus, in pointing her out, isn't telling disciples to give all their money to the church. He's telling them, telling us, here's a woman who understood what it is to live in God's care and keeping. I imagine the penniless widow sleeping soundly in God's shelter that night, her snores a confession of faith.

Only those who know the grace of being kept can know the joy and purpose in going to work. When children of the gospel wake from their slumber in God's arms, they go about their work with diligence, sweat and vigor, joined to the same Almighty hand that held them in their beds.

Psalm 127 is a stewardship prayer. A pledge dedication prayer. It says God is at work in the world, and the purpose of our energy and materials, our watching and striving, is for joining God in his work. The bottom line of stewardship is about a lot more than giving to the church. It's about remembering who made the world us, and what we're made for; it's about knowing who saves us, and what we're saved for.

Living as our own savior and provider is a terrible burden God wouldn't have us carry. Good stewards live by the same grace in which they sleep, which is to say with open hands. You can't receive sleep, salvation or the work of God with hands that are clenched.

This is the faith in which the church makes pledges to God today. Dedicating pledges, time and ability only matters because God is at work, building a house made of you and me and all the beloved ones God gathers into his household. It's God's great joy to work out on earth the salvation that comes in Jesus Christ. God bangs his knuckles, dirties his jeans, and ends the day with dust in his hair, working to make the world whole. God labors with joy and purpose, not anxious in the least. God asks us to join him at his side, telling the good news of Jesus and showing his justice and love.

God doesn't need us, of course. We could keep our time to ourselves, our money to ourselves, our homes, our creativity, our energy all to ourselves and God would still work out salvation wherever however he pleased. But living unto ourselves is living in vain.

God wants us as workers. God wants us as watchers. God wants our witness to dispel the illusion that our life and ministry, our hope and our future, are all up to us. God is giving us kingdom work in his care and keeping. He's making us people who, without even knowing, sigh hallelujahs in their sleep. Amen.