

“Praying and Sleeping”

Psalm 42

Hardly anything we do is as ordinary as falling asleep and waking up. After re-reading and re-praying Martin Luther’s Morning and Evening Prayers, I thought that these ordinary experiences of sleeping and waking can help us understand baptismal spirituality during this Lenten journey to the Good Friday cross. They are a metaphor for the baptized life and they are more. Sleeping and waking in themselves can be living the faith into which we were baptized.

Imagine this night for yourself. Your day has gone well, but in the evening a call from your daughter changes everything. You welcome her phone calls, but tonight you sense immediately that something is very wrong. There is none of the usual teasing laughter in her voice, and before you can ask what’s wrong, she bursts out, “And now he wants out of our marriage!”

Stunned at those words, you grab for something to hold to. You need to sit down. “Oh, sweetie, no! No!” You spend the next hour listening and crying. In shock, you cannot believe it. You just didn’t see it coming.

Two hours later it’s time for bed. You have listened and talked, cried and talked some more, first with your daughter and then with your husband. Amidst the tears and words, your very sighs become prayers to God, questions to God,

pleas to God. What's going on here, God? You join with the 42nd Psalmist in asking the question, "Why have you forgotten me?"

As you pull the blanket over yourself, you realize sleep will not come easily tonight. But 5:30 comes quickly and you need to try. You try to pray but the words fail and your mind is numb.

The 42nd psalmist prays in verses 1-3 . . . As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God. ²My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and behold the face of God? ³My tears have been my food day and night, while people say to me continually, "Where is your God?"

How could this happen to your own dear daughter and your not so dear son-in-law? You had no clue. But were there clues? Scenes race through your mind. You remember sharp words between them. Was there more you should have seen, but missed? What do you do now? If you had a suggestion, would anyone listen? Images race through your mind like scenes cut from a movie, none of them pleasant. And sleep? Who can sleep when the world needs fixing?

Martin Luther had a hard time sleeping when his world was in turmoil. The pressures of religious controversy confronted him on all sides. The church Luther knew was collapsing and he went into hiding at Wartburg Castle because of threats to his life. Incredibly, he didn't crack under the pressure. Instead, he went

to work translating the Bible into everyday German so people could read it for themselves.

Luther also wrote prayers, including an evening prayer which expresses a firm trust in the goodness of God. Turn to page 1167 in the ELW and pray with me his evening prayer . . . I give thanks to you, heavenly Father, through Jesus Christ your dear Son, that you have graciously protected me today. I ask you to forgive me all my sins, where I have done wrong, and graciously to protect me tonight. Into your hands I commend myself; my body, my soul, and all that is mine. Let your holy angel be with me, so that the wicked foe may have no power over me. Amen.

Maybe this prayer will help you fall asleep. This is an expression of faith, the confidence God will hold us in his arms and bear in his heart the problems for which we see no solution. God can give us the gift of peace through the night and strength for the coming day.

What better gift in the depths of a troubled night? In our heart of hearts we know we cannot make things right at 3:00 a.m. Where this is going is unclear, this shocking mess beyond our control, but worry will not fix it. We know that and God knows that. So God invites us to lie down and sleep.

The 42nd psalmist writes in verse 8 . . .⁸By day the LORD commands his steadfast love, and at night his song is with me, a prayer to the God of my life.

The command is to release our worries, our tossing and turning, trusting that God wills us to sleep. “Into your hands we commend ourselves, our bodies, our souls, and all that is ours. Let your holy angels be with us.”

Praying and falling asleep is a form of dying. Letting go into the unconsciousness of sleep imitates the letting go of dying and resting in the arms of God. When we fall asleep, we do not know the outcome. We could die, or we could rise refreshed. We do not know. Falling asleep is an expression of trust in God, a God who holds us in tender, powerful arms no matter what the outcome of the night.

Our childhood prayer expresses this truth: “Now I lay me down to sleep; I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take.” This prayer expresses trust in God that we are going to wake no matter what. We will either wake, be reborn in the shower and mumble over reading the newspaper at breakfast. Or we will awaken in God’s bright eternal kingdom. God is with us in both places.

Try praying tonight before sleeping. And as you fall asleep, trust God will

give you what you cannot give yourself: a new day, forgiveness and another beginning, hope and resurrection.

May the peace of God . . .

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