



IT'S OKAY. GO AHEAD AND SLEEP

Christ the King Sunday, November 25, 2007

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Psalm 121

"He who keeps you neither slumbers nor sleeps."

--Psalm 121:4

In China there is one of the most astonishing archaeological sites in the world today. In Xian, China, in the mid-1970's, construction workers happened to accidentally unearth the tomb of one of the emperors of the Chin Dynasty, which ruled China 200 years before Christ. They found that the emperor had included in his tomb life-size terra cotta replicas of his soldiers. In fact, six thousand soldiers, each with individualized features, lined up in battle formation, were buried in that tomb.

Years ago, President Reagan visited China, and they took him to Xian. It was one of those moments where the visiting head of state was supposed to express his wonder and appreciation at the sight his hosts had laid out before him.

As you know, President Reagan had a great sense of humor. They brought him to stand before the six thousand soldiers who had stood in battle formation for more than two thousand years. President Reagan looked at them all, and he said, "At ease."

I can't help but believe that today God is standing up here before the rows of us Presbyterians and saying, "At ease, at ease."

My sermon title this morning, as you can see, is: "*It's Okay. Go to Sleep.*" I see some of you smiling. I know that some of you can sometimes drift off a bit during the sermon. I know of a church where the choir sits behind the chancel and there's one choir member who is a regular. He wears dark shades during the sermon. If you feel like sleeping during my sermon this morning I won't take offense. You probably need it, and it's a sign that

you're comfortable enough here to do it. And that's good. You're in God's care. After all, many of us have a hard time relaxing, trusting in God's provision and protection, don't we? We keep trying to control things, to manage things – as if everything is up to us.

Well, our scripture this morning, the 121st Psalm, speaks to this. After the 23rd Psalm, Psalm 121 is perhaps the most familiar and beloved psalm in the Bible. People love its simple but beautiful cadence, and its deep, confident faith. You can find it at page 443 of the Old Testament in the Bible in your pew. I invite you to turn to it now. As you are turning to it let me simply say that this is a psalm of trust and confidence in God, a psalm that was traditionally sung by pilgrims on their way to and from Jerusalem – times in which they were potentially exposed to the dangers of man and beast and storm. The psalm opens with a question “*I lift my eyes to the hills – from where will me help come?*” --- (a question probably spoken by the people, the congregation) -- and the remainder of the psalm --- (probably spoken by a priest) – gives answer to the question.

Listen.....

*¹I lift up my eyes to the hills—
from where will my help come?*

*²My help comes from the LORD,
who made heaven and earth.*

*³He will not let your foot be moved;
he who keeps you will not slumber.*

*⁴He who keeps Israel
will neither slumber nor sleep.*

*⁵The LORD is your keeper;
the LORD is your shade at your right hand.*

*⁶The sun shall not strike you by day,
nor the moon by night.*

*⁷The LORD will keep you from all evil;
he will keep your life.*

*⁸The LORD will keep
your going out and your coming in
from this time on and for evermore.*

Not long ago, I was lying awake at 2:00 in the morning (yes, pastors have this problem sometimes, too), wrestling with the problems in my life. As I lay there in the darkness, I made a concerted effort. I prayed, “Lord, now I want to shift all these problems from my shoulders onto your shoulders. The government of my life now goes onto your shoulders -- my problems, my difficulties, all of them – I shift onto You.”

I could feel the tension drain out of my body at that moment. I could feel that much-needed and much-desired restfulness and peace coming on. And I'm sure you've had that experience as well when you've given things over to God in prayer. But only a few moments later, I thought, -- "Wait a minute, the burden's back on me again." I had taken the government back onto my shoulders. For the next hour, it was, "The government goes on your shoulders, God. No, I want it back on my shoulders. No, it's on your shoulders. My shoulders. Your shoulders. My shoulders. Your shoulders."

Friends, let me say something very obvious,
---something that doesn't really need to be said aloud.
God never sleeps.

I love Psalm 121. It says: "*He who keeps you neither slumbers nor sleeps.*"

That means when a problem wakes you up in the middle of the night, you can say, "Okay, Lord, this is yours," and you can roll over and go back to sleep. *He who keeps you neither slumbers nor sleeps.* Do you ever do that? *He who keeps you neither slumbers nor sleeps.*

Think about it. God was up all night long preparing this worship service for us. Did you think about that when you came here this morning? While I was sleeping, God was preparing me to preach. While they were sleeping, God was preparing our ushers and greeters to welcome and assist you. While they were sleeping, our choir was being prepared to sing. You were being prepared to listen and to learn, to grow and to give glory to God with your singing and praying and with all of your worshiping. While you were sleeping.....God was working. And God continues to work and to care and provide. As the psalm declares:

"The LORD is your keeper.....

He who keeps you will not slumber.

⁴He who keeps [you]

will neither slumber nor sleep.

How important it is to remember this today – Christ the King Sunday (the last Sunday on the Christian calendar, when we acknowledge Christ's rule/ God's rule over all) – but of course not just today, but every day: -- that God has things in hand – that he is in control. Our focus at this time of the year automatically shifts to Christmas. Thanksgiving is now gone, and so our focus moves inevitably, naturally towards the Christmas celebration. Next Sunday we will be starting a new sermon series entitled, "Getting into the Spirit: The Songs of Christmas," in which we will look at some of our favorite carols and take to heart their grand message of God's love taking on flesh and form in his Son, Jesus Christ. Well, Christmas season is a time of stress for many of us. In fact, the stress level of Americans jumps at Christmas time. It started for some Friday morning early – 4 a.m. to be exact – at Kohl's. I think you've got to be crazy to be up that early, unless you

absolutely have to! And then we shop for just the right gifts for John and Susan, for Bill and Laura. We put a lot of extra stress on ourselves, with the underlying assumption that it's all up to us – that if it's going to happen, then we have to make it happen. And of course there is some truth to that. We do have to do some things, but underneath there is the illusion of control.

We're in a "lead-up time." So let's think back to the lead-up to the first Christmas. Think about Mary, and the difficulties of her pregnancy. Perhaps you've heard of the "Holmes Stress Test," which measures stress by assigning a certain number of stress points to various events in our lives. For example, just celebrating Christmas is fourteen stress points. Someone has applied this stress scale to Mary at the first Christmas.

- She was pregnant. Any pregnancy is 40 stress points.
- It was a problem pregnancy, because she was unmarried. Add 20 points.
- She had a change in living conditions because she went to stay with her cousin Elizabeth. Add 25.
- Marriage to Joseph added 50 points.
- As a new parent, she experienced a change of sleep with her new baby: 15 points.
- Then all these uninvited guests kept coming and going, angels and the wise men and the like.

The prognostication is that after 200 points, you become ill. Mary topped out the chart with 424 points, and she did not become ill; she did not go freaking into the night; she did not break up with Joseph; she kept perfect composure because she gave glory to God. "*Here am I,*" she said, "*the servant of the Lord; let it be according to your word.*"

When we say like Mary – "*Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be according to your word*" -- when we do that – when we trust ourselves into the Lord's keeping -- God takes the responsibility, and the government onto his shoulders. And what a difference it makes – in our relaxation and in our composure.

Tom Tewell tells the story about a man named Dr. George McCasland, who was a YMCA director in Western Pennsylvania. They were having lots of problems in his "Y": decreasing membership, finances out of control, terrible staff problems, etc.

Dr. McCasland began working 85 hours a week. In the time when he wasn't working, all he could think about were the problems at the "Y." He reached the point where he was unable to sleep. Finally, he went to see a therapist. The therapist said, "You are very close to a nervous breakdown." Dr. McCasland knew he had to let go, but he didn't know how to do it.

One day he decided to take a day off and walk through the woods. It was a beautiful day; he could hear the birds chirping as he walked along. He felt himself relax. His shoulders began to un-kink for the first time in months. So Dr. McCasland sat down underneath a tree. At that moment, he decided he was somehow going to let go, once and for all. He

pulled out a pad of paper and pencil, and he wrote a letter to God. The letter said: “Dear God, I hereby resign as General Manager of the Universe. Love, George.”

Telling the story with a twinkle in his eye, Dr. McCasland said, “Wonder of wonders, God accepted my resignation!”

Now, I’m not saying anything you don’t already know. But sometimes we need reminding of what we know. Maybe that’s how it is for some of us here this morning. Maybe that’s how it is for you. You’re trying too hard and you need to hear God’s word, “At ease.”..... “I can handle it. You can count on me to keep you.”

Is that how it is for you? Do any of you need to resign as General Manager of the Universe? Is there anyone here who is trying to fix everything and everybody? Your spouse? Your children? Your grandchildren? Your co-workers? Your employees?

You know, the line forms right here in worship for submitting your resignation as General Manager of the Universe. You can do that right now. You can submit your resignation. And God will accept your resignation, just as he will receive mine. After all, he is God and we are not. And He is able to keep us from falling.

Would you join me in prayer?

Lord, would You accept right now our mass resignations as General Managers of the Universe? We who work so hard to impose our will on the world, upon other people and even upon You, God – today we vacate the throne and bow down before You. We take the crowns from our heads, cast them at your feet, and say, “Worthy art thou, O Lord, our God, to receive honor and power and dominion, because You are God, and we are not. Help us to rest,-- to truly rest – in the calm and confident assurance that the government of our lives is upon your shoulders – and that he is able to keep us; through Jesus Christ, the King of kings, and Lord of lords. Amen.