

Keep watch, dear Lord,
with those who work, or watch, or weep this night,
and give your angels charge over those who sleep.
Tend the sick, Lord Christ; give rest to the weary, bless the dying,
soothe the suffering, pity the afflicted, shield the joyous;
and all for your love's sake. Amen. (Book of Common Prayer)



UNEXPECTED SAINTS: JOHN BAILLIE (1886-1960)

“Except the Lord build the house, they labour in vain that build it; except the Lord keep the city, the watchman waketh but in vain. It is vain for you to rise up early, to sit up late, to eat the bread of sorrows; for so he giveth his beloved sleep.” –Psalm 127:1-2

My subject is the theology of sleep. It is an unusual subject, but I make no apology for it. I think we hear too few sermons about sleep. After all, we spend a very large share of our lives sleeping. I suppose that on an average I've slept for eight hours out of twenty-four during the whole of my life, and that means that I've slept for well over twenty years.... Don't you agree then that the Christian gospel should have something to say about the sleeping third of our lives as well as about the waking two-thirds of it? I believe it has something to say, and that this text from the hundred and twenty-seventh psalm serves as a good beginning for the exposition of it. The point the Psalmist is making is that we should not carry our cares and anxieties to bed with us. Beds were made for sleeping, not for worrying....

Sleep is surely one of God's most precious gifts, as none know better than those who are victims of insomnia. It has been ordained that our lives here below should consist in an alternation of activity and rest, of sleeping and waking; but we could not support the activity if we had no rest, or the waking hours if we had no sleep. How blessed a thing it is, then, that we are not expected to retain the conscious control of our lives by night as well as by day, but that we are allowed to lay the reins in God's hands, entrusting ourselves to His care when we are least able to care for ourselves. But we must really entrust ourselves. Sleep comes best to those who most put their trust in God. That is what the Psalmist means by saying 'He giveth his beloved sleep'. His beloved are those who trust Him. There is no better soporific than a trustful heart, no surer way of having a good night's rest than to commend ourselves to God's keeping, in believing prayer, before we go to sleep.

“He giveth unto his beloved in sleep”....speaks **not only of the blessedness of sleep itself but of the blessed things that are given us through its agency.** When we sleep we are not merely being released, we are also being restored. Without any effort of our own a new supply of energy is being built up within us. We wake with fresh vigour, and we look out on the world with different eyes. Our minds are clearer, and very often we find that the problems of the day before have settled themselves while we slept....During the day we are so anxious to keep the reins of our destiny so entirely in our own hands that God has to wait until we are asleep in order to do for us and in us those things which we cannot do for ourselves. (from *Christian Devotion*)

[The Sleep Foundation found that more than half of Americans are “underslept” – sleeping less than seven hours per night on a regular basis.]

from “Sleep Therapy” by Lauren Winner (2006)

Last night, I pulled one of my all-nighters....but all-nighters are just the most extreme example of something many of us do quite a lot: chip away at sleep in order to do something else. Usually that something else is work. [The other night] I had some trouble falling asleep, worrying about the correspondence that was accumulating in my email account... Eventually I rolled over and set my alarm back from 6:30 to 5:00, resolved to use the extra 90 minutes of wakefulness for email. Wakefulness, actually, may not be the right word. For though I “gained” 90 minutes in which I was awake, I actually lost wakefulness. Sleep specialists are virtually unanimous on this: With some

notable exceptions who seem wired to operate on a different schedule (Thomas Edison is a famous example), we human beings cannot lose sleep without decreasing our attention span, our response time, our acuity. I may have been awake for 90 extra minutes, but I was less wakeful all day long.

One hundred years ago—before Mr. Edison's marvelous invention—people slept about nine hours a night. They were right in line with **the eight to ten hours of sleep specialists say we need. Now we are a nation of the chronically sleep-deprived....**The irony is that although many of us trade sleep for productivity, **we would actually be more productive if we slept more....** We concentrate better and are less easily distracted when well-rested. When high schools started the day 85 minutes later, students got more sleep at night, fell asleep in class less often, and got better grades. **When we've gotten good sleep, we are also happier, nicer, and healthier.** "Even a modest disturbance of sleep produces a reduction of natural immune responses and [production of] T-cell[s]," cells that combat the effects of viruses and pathogens on our bodies.

Sleep deprivation carries great costs, both in dollars and in human life. Tragedies related to sleep deprivation—car wrecks, accidents at the workplace, and so forth—cost Americans more than \$50 billion a year, and result in at least 20,000 deaths; sleep deprivation causes 100,000 traffic accidents a year....

When folks from my local church gather for an evening meal, we usually close with Compline, the nighttime service from the Book of Common Prayer. This service—in which we pray for a peaceful night and a perfect end—is helping me to understand sleep as part of faithfulness. For it is sheer hypocrisy to pray with my community for a peaceful night and a perfect end if I know I am going home to put in three or four more hours answering email.

Sleep more: this may seem a curious answer to the question of what Christians can do for the common good. Surely one could come up with something more other-directed, more sacrificial, less self-serving. Or more overtly political... or more communitarian....[But] for the moment I am sticking with the small, if challenging, task of becoming better rested. Not only does sleep have evident social consequences, not only would sleeping more make us better neighbors and friends and family members and citizens. **Sleeping well may also be part of Christian discipleship, at least in our time and place.**

It's not just that a countercultural embrace of sleep bears witness to values higher than "the cares of this world, the deceitfulness of riches, and the desire for other things." **A night of good sleep—a week, or month, or year of good sleep—also testifies to the basic Christian story of Creation.** We are creatures, with bodies that are finite and contingent. For much of Western history, the poets celebrated sleep as a welcome *memento mori*, a reminder that one day we will die: hence Keats's ode to the "sweet embalmer" sleep, and Donne's observation, "Natural men have conceived a twofold use of sleep; that it is a refreshing of the body in this life; that it is a preparing of the soul for the next." Is it any surprise that in a society where we try to deny our mortality in countless ways, we also deny our need to sleep?

The unarguable demands that our bodies make for sleep are a good reminder that we are mere creatures, not the Creator. For it is God and God alone who "neither slumbers nor sleeps." Of course, the Creator has slept, another startling reminder of the radical humility he embraced in becoming incarnate. He took on a body that, like ours, was finite and contingent and needed sleep. To push ourselves to go without sleep is, in some sense, to deny our embodiment, to deny our fragile incarnations—and perhaps to deny the magnanimous poverty and self-emptying that went into his Incarnation. French poet Charles Peguy makes the point well:

I don't like the man who doesn't sleep, says God.

Sleep is the friend of man, Sleep is the friend of God.

Sleep is perhaps the most beautiful thing I have created.

And I myself rested on the seventh day. ...

But they tell me that there are men who work well and sleep badly. Who don't sleep.

What a lack of confidence in me.

To sleep, long and soundly, is to place our trust not in our own strength and hard work, but in him without whom we labor in vain.