

A Sermon
Rev. W. Kevin Holder
Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
July 29, 2018

Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep

Psalm 127

I was preparing this sermon when I heard the children in our day care ministry getting ready for nap time. As they began settling into their cots, a teacher led them in prayer. With voices joined, they said, "Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep; Guard me Jesus through my nap, wake me when it's time for snack. Amen."

It's a variation on the classic children's bedtime prayer from the 18th century. Some of us learned it as, "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." Another version says, "'Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep; His love to guard me through the night, and wake me in the morning's light."

I see that the Lord has awakened you in this Sunday morning's light. I hope you had a good night's sleep. For many of us, that's hard to come by. Surveys show that we Americans are among the world's leaders in sleep deprivation. Millions of adults in the United States have chronic sleep loss or a sleep disorder of some kind. Most Americans who can't sleep say it's because they're anxious about finances. There are many other worries and anxieties that keep us up at night too, along with physical or biological factors. Whatever the combination of elements, our restlessness and sleeplessness take their toll on our psychological health, our physical health, our home life, our work productivity, and so on.

Sleep is a gift of God. It's one of the ways that God provides for what we need. And God provides it without our excessive striving. The psalmist says, "In vain you rise up early and stay up late, toiling for food to eat—for he grants sleep to those he loves" (v. 2). True, one of the things that can contribute to a good night's sleep is a hard day's work. But at the same time, one of the factors in our sleeplessness is often our unwillingness or inability to slow down and shut down for the night, or for whatever period of the day we need rest. So many of us live in a state of relentless activity or chronic busyness that carries over beyond the workplace into the other spaces of our lives, including our homes and our bedrooms.

These days, our relentless "toiling" is bound up with how tied we are to our devices. We often have trouble resting because we're always on, always connected, always up and running. As others have pointed out, we've become more and more like our computers themselves. In other words, even when our devices are in "sleep mode," they're in a state of low-power readiness. All we have to do is press a key, swipe a screen, or speak into a microphone, and the machine will quickly wake up, ready to go back to work, so that we ourselves can go back to work. One writer has put it this way: "We're facing a future in which our sense of the divide between sleep and wakefulness will fade along with the distinction between our devices' states of on and off."¹

Andy Crouch has written a book offering guidance on how to make wise choices about using technology in our families. In a section on the importance of sleep, he says:

If there is one thing that sums up the difference between human beings and our technological devices—and, just as importantly, between us and our Creator—it is this: we need sleep. Lots of sleep. We are meant to be still, quiet, unconscious, and vulnerable for roughly a third of every day, and more when we are young.

Devices do not need this kind of rest. While anything with moving parts requires periodic maintenance, and even fully electronic devices will eventually wear out and fail, most of our technology can function for days, months, or even years without anything like sleep.

But we are not devices; we are persons. And while we are made in the image of God, in this respect we are not like God at all. God “never slumbers or sleeps” (Ps. 121:4 NLT) but is continually present and available to all creation. God’s unsleeping care is good news: we sleepy creatures can trust that our needs will be provided for while we can do nothing on our own behalf.²

As the psalmist reminds us, sleep is a sign of our dependence on God. Sleep isn’t something that we produce; it’s something that God gives. It’s a form of divine grace. When you crawl under the covers, turn out the lights, and call it a day, one of the things you’re doing is acknowledging your reliance on the power and provision of your Maker. You’re recognizing your vulnerability, your limitations, your mortality. The great preacher Charles Spurgeon summed it up this way: “God gave us sleep to remind us we are not Him.”³

Think of sleep as a form of sabbath. Sleep is rest that calls a halt to our workaholicism, our pursuit of productivity, and our determination to do and do and do. When you sleep, you’re in a passive rather than an active mode. You’re surrendering control rather than seizing control. You’re prepared not so much to act as to be acted upon. In fact, sleep can be an occasion for God to do some of his most important work on us and in us. As others have pointed out, spiritual growth occurs “not only as the result of sleep, but during sleep.”⁴

Sleep has a unique way of reminding us that our bodies are part of our relationship with God. “Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep.” But remember that we are embodied souls. Our spirituality, our relationship with God, involves our limbs and our organs, including the most complex organ of all, the brain. Scientific studies continue to show us how rest is essential to the brain’s health and vitality. During sleep, your brain goes through some “housekeeping.” Inconsequential information gets removed. Biochemical residue gets cleaned up. Things you’ve learned and experienced get consolidated so new memories can be made and new knowledge processed. In other words, the time when you’re off the clock is the time God is very much on the clock, working the night shift, renewing and repairing you from head to toe.

God grants us sleep so that we may be rested and restored, in heart, mind soul, and strength. That way you’re better able to love God and love your neighbor with your whole self. I’m not just urging sleep for the sake of sleep, though that in itself is important. What’s also important is faithful rest that sustains faithful work and faithful service for the Lord. In other words, what we do with the gift of sleep shapes and affects how we live when we’re awake. Generally speaking, more rest means that you’re not only more healthy, but also more alert, more focused, more productive, more efficient, more pleasant, more prepared to engage fruitfully and effectively with others. All these things can contribute to the daily task of following Jesus.

So sleep isn’t just about having replenished neurons and being in a better mood. It’s about discipleship. It’s about taking our shut-eye and offering it up for kingdom purposes, believing that God cares about, and is involved with, the so-called routine matters of life,

some of which appear in today's Scripture passage. Things like home, community, work, and family.

Psalms 127 is just one in a series or collection of psalms known as Songs of Ascent. These are psalms that were probably used by pilgrims on the journey to Jerusalem or during a celebration in Jerusalem. At times, these psalms focus on being in the city, particularly at the Temple, in order to offer praise and thanks to God. So God's people knew the importance of having a sacred destination, a holy space, a geographical center that embodied their highest loyalty and their supreme purpose. The house of the Lord was holy.

But this didn't mean that the places from which they had journeyed, and the lives they lived at home, were unholy. They too were a sacred part of God's purposes. The fact that Psalm 127 focuses on seemingly routine, everyday matters shows us that God's people had no problem holding together loyalty to God's home with loyalty at home. When they made their journey to Jerusalem, to the Temple, it was an act of devotion to a God whose will and purpose embraced all of life.

Your own journey here to our church sanctuary this morning may not rise to the level of a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. But it still indicates that you recognize God's claim on your life, that you acknowledge the presence and activity of God in the ordinary matters of each day, and that you want to embody his will in those matters, including your sleep habits.

Remember that the Lord's Day, like the other days of the week, includes rhythms of being on and being off, of being active and being at rest. Sleep was part of your preparation for this morning's worship. In fact, your sleep could qualify as an expression of worship. As Tish Harrison Warren says, "Slow down. Curl up. Close your eyes. Let your snoring proclaim God's faithfulness."⁵ So you woke from rest, one form of worship, in order to be here for another form of worship. From here, you'll enjoy some lunch and who knows, maybe a Sunday afternoon nap. Or maybe drowsiness has arrived early, even during this sermon. When it comes to snoozing, you may already be practicing what I'm preaching. One pastor tells about a time when a sweet elderly lady told him, in all sincerity, "That was such a wonderful sermon that it put me right to sleep."

In one respect, the aim of this sermon is to put you right to sleep. Just not right now. Later in the day, particularly tonight. That's when you'll have a good opportunity to pause and reflect on this day with gratitude, and to offer thanks for all God's gifts, including the one that awaits you when your head hits the pillow.

Some of you are probably familiar with the children's bedtime book *Goodnight Moon*. Author Arianna Huffington has recorded a digital age version of the story, aimed primarily at adults, called *Goodnight Smartphone*. It includes these lines: "Goodnight kittens. Goodnight emails unwritten. Goodnight clocks. Goodnight inbox. . . . Goodnight worrying about weight loss. Goodnight demanding boss. Goodnight test for which I need to cram. Goodnight Instagram."⁶ Fitting words for folks like us who are used to powering up early and powering down late. It's not easy for us to turn out the light, close our eyes, and go into that divinely-given state of powerlessness called sleep.

And yet, that can be the time, the space, and the place where we most experience God's power to preserve us and keep us. In another psalm, David says, "I lie down and sleep; I wake again, because the Lord sustains me" (3:5). The Lord sustained you through the night, and awakened you for this day. He is present and working during this day and into the night, where once again you'll say to him, "Now I lay me down to sleep. . . ."

¹ Sophie Weiner, "Humans Are Developing an Always-on Sleep Mode." Motherboard website. January 22, 2016. Accessed July 25, 2018 < https://motherboard.vice.com/en_us/article/nz7b9k/humans-are-developing-an-always-on-sleep-mode>.

² Andy Crouch, *The Tech-Wise Family: Everyday Steps for Putting Technology in Its Proper Place* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2017) 111.

³ Quoted in Kate Shellnut, "God Wants You to Get Some Sleep." Christianity Today website. January 2017. Accessed July 26, 2018 <<https://www.christianitytoday.com/women/2017/january/god-wants-you-to-get-some-sleep.html>>.

⁴ Quoted in Shellnut, "God Wants You to Get Some Sleep."

⁵ Tish Harrison Warren, "Get More Sleep." InterVarsity website. October 29, 2013. Accessed July 26, 2018.

⁶ In Shellnut, "God wants You to Get Some Sleep."