

Streetsville United Church
Sunday, April 26, 2009
Rev. John Tapscott

"THREE KINDS OF SLEEP"

Psalm 4:8

The Bible deals with just about every subject of concern to humans, including the subject of sleep. And why not? After all, we spend 1/4 to 1/3 of every 24 hour period in sleep or at least trying to sleep. But the Bible speaks of sleep in three distinct ways. The Bible speaks of physical sleep; it speaks of the sleep of death, and it also speaks of spiritual sleep.

Let's consider, first of all, physical sleep.

Recently I read Psalm 4, a Psalm of David, and I was struck by verse 8 which David wrote after considering the power of his enemies and the even greater power of the Lord: "I will both lie down and sleep in peace; for you alone, O Lord, make me lie down in safety."

Now most of us, especially as we get a bit older, experience times when we find it hard to sleep. And even in sleep, our dreams can haunt us. Recently I was speaking to a long-time family friend who worked for 40 years at the General Electric plant in Toronto. One job she had for years was testing light bulbs before they were packed into boxes for shipment. She mentioned that she sometimes has a dream where she's at work and can't keep up with all the light bulbs that are coming along the conveyer belt towards her. She wakes up with a sense of a panic. And it's been 20 years since she retired. Even our sleep is not always restful.

Our sleep rhythms get mixed up, too. We find it hard to sleep at night, but then find ourselves feeling sleepy during the day. I read a piece recently called the best 10 responses if your boss finds you asleep at your desk. 10. "Don't you know that this is one of the seven habits of highly effective people?" 9. "This is in exchange for the six hours last night I dreamed about work." 8. "This is a 15-minute power nap like they raved about in the last management seminar you sent me to." 7. "Just pacing myself for the all-nighter tonight." 6. "Dell Computers wanted me to test how much weight their keyboards can stand." 5. "Oh no! Why did you interrupt me? I'd almost figured out a solution to our biggest problem." 4. "Someone put decaf in the coffee machine." 3. "Ah, the unique and unpredictable sleep patterns of a workaholic." 2. "Don't worry, I'm

still billing the client." and the # 1 response if found asleep at your desk. "and I especially thank you for my wonderful boss. Amen."

Well, getting a good nights sleep is sometimes problematic for us and so what a blessing it is when we can say, "I will both lie down and sleep in peace..." and to then to wake from sleep renewed and refreshed. And it's not just the length of sleep that matters, but the quality of sleep. I feel more rested from a peaceful six hours sleep than from eight hours of tossing and turning.

Of course, there may be physical reasons why we find it difficult to sleep, like illness, or that large pizza slice you foolishly ate half-an-hour before you went to bed. But sometimes there are spiritual issues that keep us from falling asleep. And as spiritual troubles they require a spiritual answer, which God gives us through Jesus Christ. And it's when that answer really takes hold of us that we can say, "I will both lie down and sleep in peace, for you alone, O Lord, make me lie down in safety."

In our Gospel reading today from Luke 24, Jesus asked the disciples, "Why are you troubled?" or "Why are you frightened?" Well, there are many things that trouble and frighten us, things that take away our peace and cause us sleepless nights.

Perhaps it's the future that troubles us. We don't know what the future holds, but we see what's happening all around us. People losing their jobs and even their pensions; businesses struggling and some falling into bankruptcy. And then there's just the thought about what we're facing tomorrow - a stressful day at work, a big project, a meeting with your boss or a client, an important exam.

Well, if you are fearful and troubled about what's ahead here's a good word for you, a word that may help you to lie down and sleep in peace. It's a discovery that a Christian named Sue Kidd made and wrote about in Guideposts magazine. When Sue's husband was seriously ill, she felt very anxious. "I'm so afraid," she said to a friend. The friend smiled and asked, "Do you know how many times the Scriptures say, "Fear not," or "Do not be afraid?" Sue shook her head, "No". "It's a very curious number," her friend continued, "three hundred and sixty five times." Sue said, "But that's..." "Yes, one for each day of the year," her friend said. One "fear not" for every day of the year. A coincidence? Perhaps. But God does not want his people to be afraid. Jesus is risen and alive. In Jesus God makes his face shine upon us. The future is God's future, and just as God has been there for us every day in the past, so he will be there every day in the future as well. The Holy Spirit will help us tomorrow just as he helped us yesterday and is helping us today. Put the future in God's hands. Commit it to

him. Commit it to him and then you can say, "I will both lie down and sleep in peace, for you alone, O Lord, make me lie down in safety."

Sometimes our sleep is not only troubled by thoughts of the future, but by thoughts of the past. The problem is as old as Adam and Eve. It's called guilt. We are haunted by the past and we feel separated from God and from others. The Psalmist says, "Offer the right sacrifices and put your trust in the Lord." Friends, the right sacrifice has already been made, and it was made by God. Christ crucified was God's once and for all sacrifice for our sins. So in repentance we confess our sins to God and accept his forgiveness in Christ. "If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just and will forgive our sins and cleanse from all unrighteousness."

Whether it is the future or the past - trust in the Lord our God. The future is in his hands. The past has been blotted away by the blood of Christ. Trust in the Lord and then you can say "I will both lie down and sleep in peace, for you alone, O Lord, make me lie down in safety."

The Bible speaks of physical sleep; **it also speaks of the sleep of death.**

In his great chapter on the resurrection, 1 Corinthians 15, Paul continually refers to death as "falling asleep." He mentions the appearance of Christ to "more than five hundred witnesses at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep." He says that "if Christ has not been raised, those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished." Then comes the declaration, "But in fact, Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep. For as in Adam all die so also in Christ shall all be made alive. But each in his own order, Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ."

Paul does not deny the reality of death, nor its sometimes tragic circumstances nor its power to cause grief and pain. But Paul is saying that for all of us who are in Christ by faith death is a temporary state, a sleep, from which God will raise us as he raised Jesus. That's why you sometimes read words like this inscribed on the tombstones of believers, "Asleep in Jesus" or "Until he comes."

Jesus appeared to his disciples in the Upper Room, saying, "Behold my hands and feet, that it is I myself, handle me and see...and when he had thus spoken he showed them his hands and feet." Yes, his body had been transformed by the resurrection, but it was a not ghost they were seeing. It was he. He was risen and alive. His resurrection was real. Death had been conquered.

For Christians death is a real and undeniable fact, but it is not the final reality. For Christians death is a sleep from which we will be awakened on the day of Christ's coming. We will share fully in his victory and be given the kind of body Christ had in his own resurrection, a body fit for life in God's everlasting Kingdom. So at the time of physical death those in Christ die with this faith, "I will both lie down and sleep in peace, for you alone O LORD, make me lie down in safety."

Finally, the Bible speaks of spiritual sleep.

This is a dangerous kind of sleep that we must guard against diligently with the Lord's help. Paul writes in 1 Thessalonians 5:5,6 "For you are all children of light and children of the day, we are not of the night or of the darkness. So then let us not sleep, as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober."

Paul is not referring here to physical sleep or the sleep of death; he is referring to spiritual sleep. It is a state in which we become indifferent to God and to spiritual practices like reading Scripture, praying, worship, and service. Seeking and doing God's will falls way down on our list of priorities. And the evil one really goes to work as God's people fall asleep spiritually. In subtle ways he works to undermine what is good and wholesome and righteous. Society becomes used to things that were once regarded as unspeakable.

On a Toronto radio talk show recently a question was discussed, "Should incest be made legal?" Now what has society come to when such things are even considered. But you can be sure that once the seed is planted, it will eventually bloom into something that is accepted. Or how is it that the powerful and well-to-do keep getting more and while the poor suffer? How is it that bankrupt institutions can use tax-payers money to pay huge bonuses to employees who helped cause the mess? Why is it that the internet has become such a cesspool and a trap for so many people? Why is it that we have become so used to a culture of death, rather than of life?

Well, these things thrive as God's people fall asleep spiritually, when we become indifferent and inactive. So we cannot let this spiritual sleep overcome us. This is a time when we must be "diligent in seeking first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness..." immersing ourselves in the truth of God's word. We must guard against spiritual sleep and stay awake, both for the sake of our own souls, and for the sake of society. "Therefore let us not sleep spiritually as others do, but let us keep awake..."