

“Asleep at the Switch”

Acts 20:7-12, 16-24¹

Jill and I lived in Charleston, South Carolina while on active duty in the Navy, and we were members of the Dorchester-Waylyn Baptist Church in North Charleston during those years. It happened that I was asked to serve as interim Minister of Music for a time, as I had previously done in the little mostly-military church of which I was a member in Middletown, Rhode Island.

As is sometimes the case with some of you, perhaps—with sick children, if not at work—I’d been up late on duty at the ship one weekend, and on Sunday morning I was so tired that I actually fell asleep on the platform during the pastor’s message. I’m not sure how long I was asleep or how obvious my slumber was, but I was dreadfully embarrassed when I realized what had happened!

We had a member in one of our Kentucky churches who worked the third shift as a nurse. Because she wanted to set a good example for her children, Susan came to church nearly every Sunday morning anyway, and she nodded off on the back pew as often as not. I didn’t mind at all, because I knew the price at which she had come.

People sleep in church for many reasons. Sometimes we fall asleep because of fatigue; sometimes because of illness or the side-effects of medication; sometimes we nod off because we’re uninterested in what’s going on.

The story is told that a woman’s husband came to church every Sunday morning and faithfully fell asleep during the sermon. When she asked her pastor what she should do about this, he told her to get some famously horrible Limburger cheese, wrap it up carefully, and put it in her purse. “When your husband nods off,” the minister said, “just unwrap a corner of that cheese, wave it under his nose, and he should wake up.”

The dutiful parishioner took this counsel to heart, and on the next Sunday morning she had a predictable opportunity to deploy the cheese. Her husband did indeed awake with a start, exclaiming loudly, “Louise! Get your feet off my pillow!”

That story is reminiscent of what actually did happen to a teenager named Eutychas in our text in Acts 20. As we continue our journey through Acts, we find Paul on his way to Jerusalem for what God’s Spirit had told him would be the last time, and he was making farewell stops at many of the churches he had founded along the way. On this occasion he was in Troas, a town near the southern entrance to the Dardanelles, one of the straits that separate Europe and Asia at the northern end of the Aegean Sea.

Acts 20:7 tells us that Paul had gathered with the local believers on the first day of the week to share in the Lord’s Supper. From the very beginning, Christians have worshiped on Sunday, the first day of the week rather than on Saturday, the Jewish Sabbath, in recognition and in celebration of the fact that it was on The First Day that Jesus rose from the dead, securing our salvation forever (Hebrews 9:12).

It also appears to have been the case that the early church observed the Lord’s Supper every week, as many faith groups do even today. While coming to the Lord’s Table takes up a good bit of time in

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the First Baptist Church of Bristol, Virginia on January 17, 2010.

each week's service, many who observe this practice say that it deepens their experience of Communion, as many of us find to be the case with our weekly experience of the Lord's Prayer.

This meeting, at least, was in the evening, and Paul spoke for a very long time, trying to encourage his friends to deeper faith and continued obedience to Jesus. Paul kept talking all the way to midnight, and the combination of the late hour, fatigue, and the stuffiness in the room from the crowd and all the flickering lamps caused Eutychas to fall asleep and fall to his death from his seat in a third-floor window. God enabled Paul to restore Eutychas to life, and the company went back upstairs to observe the Lord's Supper with great rejoicing. Eutychas is an example of one kind of sleep that overtakes us, whether in church or not.

You and I desperately need physical sleep, and most of our world has been sleep-deprived almost since the arrival of electric lights. If we don't get sufficient physical sleep, our minds and bodies deteriorate in both subtle and dramatic ways. Most of us need more physical sleep; but there are other kinds of sleep that we do well to avoid.

Many young parents, asleep to their real opportunities, pursue their careers to the detriment and sometimes to the destruction of their children's lives. In one of the churches where I served as Minister of Pastoral Counseling, a wealthy couple brought their teenage daughter to me because she was acting out in a number of inappropriate ways. After several sessions with the young woman, I told her parents, "Your daughter's main difficulty is that it is manifestly clear to her by how you spend your time and invest your energy that you care a lot more about the financial success of your business than you do about the moral and spiritual success of her life."

In the movie, *Jack Frost*,² Michael Keaton plays a dad named Jack Frost who struggles to balance his career with fathering. He is on the verge of fulfilling his lifelong dream as a musician—signing with a record company—and he spends a lot more time in the studio than with his 11-year-old son, Charlie.

After missing Charlie's hockey game, Jack tries to make things right. He promises a Christmas vacation in a cabin in northern Colorado without any interruptions. The next day, though, Jack gets "the" phone call from a record company interested in signing his band. Jack and his wife formulate a plan for Jack to drive to Aspen, perform with his band on Christmas Day, and then drive back to the cabin to be with his family.

Charlie is crushed when Jack chooses to follow his ambition rather than keep his promise. But then, on the road to Aspen, Jack realizes the folly of his choice, turns around, and heads back toward the cabin. Unfortunately, a blinding snowstorm and faulty windshield wipers result in an accident in which Jack is killed.

A year later, Charlie decides to build a snowman, one of the few things he and his dad enjoyed doing together. Jack magically reappears, and the two of them enjoy a wonderful day together after which Charlie falls asleep. As Jack strokes his son's hair and reflects on what might have been, he says, "I was so busy trying to make my mark on the world that I never understood that you are my mark on the world." That blindness is a second kind of sleep.

² *Jack Frost* (Warner Brothers, 1998), written by Mark Steven Johnson, Steve Bloom, Jonathan Roberts, and Jeff Cesaro, and directed by Troy Miller.

Tony Campolo told a story that illustrates a third kind of sleep. Tony took a course in Chinese philosophy in graduate school for which the professor was a Buddhist monk. The monk told Tony that “You Christians teach your children to pray all wrong. You teach them to pray, ‘If I should die before I wake.’ It would be better to teach them to pray, ‘If I should wake before I die.’ The monk went on to point out that many of the people he knew were half awake when they ought to be sleeping deeply; but even worse, when they were supposed to be awake, they were still half asleep.”³

A character in the movie *Joe vs. the Volcano* made a similar point when she said, “My father says almost the whole world’s asleep—everybody you know, everybody you see, everybody you talk to. He says only a few people are awake. And those few live in a state of constant, total amazement.”⁴

I think Elizabeth Barrett Browning said this best: “Earth’s crammed with heaven, and every common bush afire with God; but only he who sees takes off his shoes. The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries.”⁵

The sleep that causes us to miss the beauty of God’s creation, the glory of a mountain sunrise, the nuzzle of a dog’s nose, and the wonder in a child’s eyes is a sad thing. God means for our life on earth to be a very good gift indeed. Genesis records that “*Then God looked over all he had made, and he saw that it was very good!*” (Genesis 1:31). And Paul later wrote, “*Awake, O sleeper, rise up from the dead, and Christ will give you light!*” (Ephesians 5:14).

But there is a final kind of sleep about which I want you to ponder as you leave this place today. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel has written that “In biblical days, prophets were astir while the world was asleep; today, the world is astir while church and synagogue are busy with trivialities.”⁶

Perhaps you’ve noticed that not so many people attend worship in Bristol today as they once did. Our church—and virtually every other church in the land—is far from full for anything we do. For whatever reason or reasons, we who know Jesus are not presenting the Good News of Jesus to our friends and neighbors in a way that feels like good news to them.

In their recent book, *UnChristian: What a New Generation Really thinks about Christianity . . . and Why It Matters*, David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons of the Barna Research Group noted that “Our most recent data show that young outsiders have lost much of their respect for the Christian faith. These days nearly two out of every five young outsiders (38 percent) claim to have a ‘bad impression of present-day Christianity.’ Beyond this, one-third of young outsiders said that Christianity represents a negative image with which they would not want to be associated. Furthermore, one out of every six young outsiders (17 percent) indicates that he or she maintains ‘very bad’ perceptions of the Christian faith.” The authors note that “though these hard-core critics represent a minority of young outsiders, this group is at least three times larger than it was just a decade ago.”⁷

I’m sure you’ll remember that Jesus’ very last words to us were “*I have been given all authority in heaven and on earth. Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father*

³ Tony Campolo, “If I Should Wake Before I Die,” *Preaching Today* tape no. 124.

⁴ *Joe vs. the Volcano* (Amblin Entertainment/Warner Brothers, 1990), directed by John Patrick Shanley.

⁵ Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806-1861), *Aurora Leigh*, Book vii.

⁶ Abraham Joshua Heschel, “The Insecurity of Freedom,” *Christianity Today*, vol. 41, no. 9.

⁷ David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *UnChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks about Christianity . . . and Why It Matters* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), p. 24.

and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you. And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:18-20).

The bad news in this is that we’re not doing a good job at all of doing what Jesus told us to do. We’re “asleep at the switch” while the world pushes past our doors on its way to eternal separation from God. We’re focused on trying to keep things like they are or on trying to make things like they used to be, saying to the world, in effect, “Get your river back under our bridge!!!” rather than trying to win the world that God is allowing to be born. That’s bad news, and that’s a losing proposition, to which the empty pews in our churches bear eloquent witness.

The good news is that our Lord is still with us, calling, commanding, and empowering us to carry out His mission in our own generation. It was of this mission that Paul spoke when he said in our second text this morning, “*My life is worth nothing to me unless I use it for finishing the work assigned me by the Lord Jesus—the work of telling others the Good News about the wonderful grace of God*” (Acts 20:24).

As Chris and Chuck make this public commitment and recommitment of their lives to follow Jesus this morning, may their example rouse the rest of us to renewed commitment to God’s inbreaking Kingdom. This isn’t a matter of doing something unpleasant, like taking bitter medicine; it’s a matter of adventure, excitement, and joy. As John put it, “*We proclaim to you what we ourselves have actually seen and heard so that you may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. We are writing these things so that you may fully share our joy*” (1 John 1:3-4).