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Palm/Passion Sunday, April 2, 2023

Liturgy 11 – “Sleeping – Sabbath, Rest and the Work of God”

Read Genesis 2: 2 – 3 and or Memorize Genesis 2: 2

I'd like you to blink your eyes. Don't keep them closed, lest you fall asleep. One out of three Americans has trouble with sleep. How much energy did it take to blink your eyes? Are you tuckered out? Problems with sleep have to do with getting to sleep, staying a sleep or waking. I don't want you to nod off during this thrilling sermon about sleep. I also don't want you to be too anxious either, because stressors are key elements that impact our sleep.

If blinking didn't use much energy and God could have created in a blink of an eye, why did God have to rest? He didn't. God is omnipotent, all-powerful. He doesn't need rest or any other human accommodations.

God gave us Sabbath, that day of rest, as a gift. He knew we needed it because we are not all-powerful. He built a rhythm into us. That's why the time changes goof us up. Cellphones, with their bings and dings, may also disrupt sleep, if we keep them with us at night.

Sleep refreshes us, but it also reminds us of our finiteness. If we want to think of it this way, God gave us the gift of sleep to refresh us and remind us. Just as we need our rest, we need our time with Him.

As Tish describes it, “Both gathered worship and our sleep habits, profess our loves, our trusts and our limits. Both involve discipline and ritual. Both require that we cease relying on our own effort and activity and lean on God for His sufficiency. Both expose our vulnerability. Both restore.”

Most have rituals for bedtime and waking. It's the in between that can be disruptive. You might have slept fine until you had to get up in the night; then the worries of the next day or the regrets of the past keep your mind moving, keeping you from needed sleep.

Sleep reveals a great deal about us. Tish points out: our sleep habits both reveal and shape our loves. If you have young children, or a new baby, you have probably sacrificed lots of sleep. Perhaps, you've sacrificed sleep for friends. You stayed up later than you

planned, because of relationships that are important to you. Those are the admirable times when we give up sleep.

Then there are the frivolous ones: things like getting absorbed in the computer and the links to different articles, which you're sure will change your life if you don't read them. How about those cat video's for all us cat-lovers or whatever video's suck you in and keep you from your rest.

We know we'll pay a price for these things. We may not function as well, be short tempered, most likely with those closest to us. We're often better behaved with those with whom we are less involved. Whereas, with our family, we know they'll continue to forgive and love us.

I'd like to think it's prayer that keeps you up at night, unless you pray while you're lying in bed. I know that's a bad one for me. I like to suggest that's because I trust God. Tish does mention that our sleep habits reveal and shape what we trust, but that one may be a stretch. Yet, we know when we lay awake, fretting and worrying, we are declaring pretty loudly who is in charge and it's definitely not God.

What we would like to be is unlimited. Cellphone and cable companies tell us we can be that. We can do whatever we want at whatever time we want. COVID has changed one big thing. You used to be able to grocery shop at three o'clock in the morning. No longer.

When we distain limits, it can cause our lives to become totally disordered. We don't do things as competently or efficiently as when we have our proper rest. The same is true when we have not prepared ourselves for worship. If we come to worship with hearts and minds closed, with a one and done attitude, we are not likely to spend time listening to God and waiting on Him.

We talked about that a couple of weeks ago, that waiting thing is just not part of our desire. I believe we have become more impatient. We're accustomed to having things instantly. As Tish reminds us, "The holiness of rest and the blessedness of unproductivity is a foreign idea to many of us."

How many of you remember when TV stations stopped broadcasting at midnight? No more. Now, if you have cable, satellite or whatever, you can view things whenever you want on whatever device you have. Once again, that sense of unlimitedness that we feel entitled to.

Not all of our problems with sleep have to do with anxiety or depression. Some problems with are physical. One of the greatest is pain. To live in pain can take away not just our sleep, but also joy. We do have to address such needs.

As the church developed its rituals, it actually set times of devotion in each day to slow us down to acknowledge God. To help people order their day, the church even developed things called canonical hours. These were fixed times of prayer and meditation at regular intervals.

They were Matins and Lauds which are often combined together during the middle of the night. Prime which is at sunrise. Terce at 9 AM, Sext at noon, None at 3 PM, Vespers at sunset and Compline at bedtime. They were to get us to worship God at different times of the day to help us order each day. These times of worship have the intentionality of putting God into our life to remind us that life is a gift from God.

These are short devotional times, which free us from the burden we carry to produce. They take us away from the frantic pace that we try to live, to accomplish all that we want to accomplish and bring us back to the understanding that He is not looking for accomplishments in our lives. God is looking for our hearts to turn to Him.

Perhaps the biggest dilemma we have about sleep is that it reminds us of our ultimate limit: we are all going to die. We do a lot to avoid that. Our culture even gives us words that we can use to euphemistically describe it: passed, lost, and departed. We don't like to think about mortality.

We may nod at it when older people die by offering that they were older and are out of pain. But when young people die, people our age die, it slams us. That could be us. As Tish reminds us "Christian spirituality calls us in the words of St. Benedict to keep 'the prospect of death before your eyes every day.'" The liturgy of Ash Wednesday puts it right smack in our faces as we receive the ashes, "dust thou art and to dust thou shalt return."

Most of our society is trying to run away from it. There is a whole industry, making billions of dollars trying to keep us young or, at least, give us the appearance of youth. Yet, in "hastening the reality of death, we learn how to live rightly." And what is that right living?

How interesting that we are at the beginning of Holy Week. As Jesus prepared to die, He prepared the disciples for His death. They did not like to hear it. They could not understand that by His death, the very gates of heaven would be opened to them, giving them the opportunity to "live in the hope of the resurrection."

Going to sleep each night gives us a little opportunity to practice accepting that resurrection as we become vulnerable. We also want to remind ourselves that in that practice, we find ways of saying and relying on God's mercy and care for us.

It was the desire to not be bound that actually got us into our biggest problem, sin. Remember that Satan offered Eve, with Adam next to her, the opportunity to be “just like God.” We strive to take His place. Sleep and worship remind us that we cannot do that. We don’t have the power or sufficiency. We need someone to be God, because we do not do very well at that.

God gave us Sabbath to counteract our desire to be in control. He gives us Sabbath so that we won’t be worn out. It reminds us that we cannot accomplish our own salvation by our works. In that reality we turn to our true hope, the grace of God that has come through Jesus Christ.

Creation began with evening and morning. Our lives do also. Between those times God fills us with His grace and gives us the opportunity to create rituals and participate in them to give meaning to our lives.

Jesus invites us to abide in Him, reminding us that even in sleep, God is working. Scientists tell us that is the time when our body’s clear out the junk. In the same way, in sleep, God is also clearing us out. He is working His restorative love in our lives and helping us to know that in all things He will be with us.

By submitting to sleep, we remind ourselves to let go of self-reliance, so that we count on the grace and mercy of God. Just as Jesus could fall asleep in the midst of the storm, He was trying to reveal to His disciples the key issue that all of us want to remember: We can have unwavering trust in our Father.

As Tish reminds us, “The gift of rest comes to us through ritual and routine. Unearned and abundant, it comes in repetition, in the learning of a habit, in the liturgy of the day.” By yielding to sleep, we are accepting our true relationship: God is God and we are His people.

Count me in: (Select one)

1. Think through your nightly liturgy. Go to bed on time and get enough sleep. Then, reflect or journal about how that affects your spiritual or physical health.
2. If you do not practice a weekly day of rest, do so this week. Reflect on how it impacts the rest of your week and your view of its impact.
3. Talk to a family member or friend about the things that keep you from rest. Prayer together about them.