

**“When sleep does not come easily...”**

A Sermon Shared with St. Andrew's United Church  
on May 20, 2018 at 10:30 a.m. (Trinity Sunday)

Scripture Reading: John 3:1-17

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I am not an easy sleeper. I start out every night with the best of intentions. This week I even heard a new phrase to describe our pre-bedtime rituals. People are calling it your sleep hygiene program. That means not watching scary things for two hours before bed, turning off the electronics, getting a glass of water at the ready because we dehydrate as we snore away, having an extra blanket close by, finding something to read for a few minutes in order to calm the mind, washing up, brushing teeth, putting on your pj's – or not – and then climbing into bed, as you then take some deep breaths, arrange the pillows just the way you like, and relax into your sacred space.

But most nights, even with all of my best sleep hygiene rituals in place, I wake up, usually at 2:07. Wide awake. Raring to go awake. In the past, I would make my way to the fridge for a glass of milk, and then I would do the dishes, fold some laundry, tidy the living room, read the paper, do the puzzles, and head back to bed when I started to feel sleepy, usually about 5 a.m.

Lately though, I have been trying to remember the wisdom I have learned along the way, and I have been forcing myself to stay in bed.

So one night last week, as I lay staring up at the ceiling, I had an epiphany. I was stewing about this sermon, about the reading from John's gospel, and I had an idea. The gospel begins with the words, “Late one night, Nicodemus visited Jesus...” I realized that Nicodemus suffered from insomnia too.

Now, that is only a part of the story, of course. Wiser Biblical scholars than I have realized the real reason he came by night was fear. You see, Nicodemus was a Pharisee, a member of the religious elite. As a Pharisee, he would have been used to discussing important religious matters, especially the interpretation of the Torah. Clearly, Nicodemus accepted Jesus as a worthy candidate for such a discussion. He had been impressed not only by Jesus' teaching but by the signs and miracles he has done.

But he comes to Jesus by night, not wanting to be seen or scorned by his Pharisee friends. Other, wiser Biblical scholars than I have suggested that he had been waiting for a private moment alone with Jesus, after the crowds had gone back home to their beds.

He came late at night, and fear was what drove him to the meeting. In my bed, in my nighttime thinking, I realized not only was Nicodemus an insomniac, like me, but it was the presence of fear in his heart and on his mind, which kept him awake. And isn't fear the reason all of us lie awake some nights, staring into the darkness? Maybe, like Nicodemus, it's the fear of being discovered, found out to be something we aren't, held up to the light of public ridicule and slander. But there are other forms of darkness that fall into our lives, all

of which come in any number of unsurprising ways: you lose your job, your marriage falls apart, your list of things that need attention has become so long that just the thought practically takes your breath away, your child acts out in some attention-getting way, the Visa bill needs to be tended to, you pray hard for something that does not happen, you begin to doubt some of the things you have been known to be sure all of your life.

Fear and darkness go hand in hand. This story's gift though is the reminder for believers to take the fears to Christ. Make space in your head for a one-on-one conversation with Jesus. Out of the darkness of night, the domain of misunderstanding and unknowing, we bring our questions and these questions are addressed by the one who called himself the word made flesh. To that encounter with a Pharisee, Jesus was able to bring the hope of new life and a fresh perspective.

"How might I know God?" Nicodemus asked.

Jesus replied, "By allowing life to enter the darkened places of your heart, for then you will learn, that God so loved the world, and you in particular, Nicodemus, that He sent me to all who believe and my gift to you is everlasting life."

So here is what I have learned from wise teachers about how to deal with a night of insomnia. When you wake up in the middle of the night and find yourself unable to go back to sleep, the first thing is to stay in bed. A number of years ago, I remember going to a retreat with a retired minister from Guelph, and he spoke to us about the body's need to rest. We need six or seven hours in every twenty-four to stretch out flat and have our feet elevated.

A Zen monk has done research about the need to rest and stay in bed. Clark Strand asserts that the invention of the incandescent lightbulb changed life on earth in ways that most human beings remain largely oblivious to. He called that invention the spiritual tipping point. By providing us with good, cheap light, the lightbulb allowed us to make advances in every area of human enterprise, and it convinced us that there was nothing we could not handle with just a little more light.

Like other insomniacs before him, Strand was drawn to his topic because he could not sleep. For ten years he had been waking up in the middle of the night and lying there for a couple of hours wondering what was wrong with him before drifting back to sleep. In his search for answers, he came across a sleep study conducted at the National Institute of Mental Health, which was how he learned that there was nothing wrong with the way he slept.

Before the invention of the light bulb, almost no one slept eight hours at a single stretch. That is a modern convention, made possible by an abundance of light. In the long centuries before the advent of electricity, people spent as much as fourteen hours of every day in the dark, which affected their rest as well as their activity. Researchers at the National Institute for Mental Health recruited people and replicated these patterns. At first, the volunteers in the sleep study played catch-up, sleeping an average of eleven hours a day.

Eventually they settled down to eight hours again, but the hours were not consecutive. With fourteen full hours of darkness available to them, most lay quietly in bed for a couple of hours each night before falling soundly asleep. Four hours later, they woke up and spent another couple of hours resting before falling asleep again. The rest hours turned out to be the most interesting ones to the scientists, since during those hours the sleepers were neither actively awake nor soundly asleep. Their body chemistry hovered somewhere in between, just like their brain waves did.

But once people learned how to light the night, they began to cut down on the number of hours they spent in darkness every day. We have learned that a good night's sleep is now seven or eight consecutive hours, much different than our ancestors.

So, when I wake in the middle of the night, the first thing to do is stay in bed and allow my mind to drift and dream.

The second practice is one of developing gratitude. In their book "Sleeping with Bread," three authors remind us that sleep comes easier when we hold gratitude in our most present thoughts. They suggest asking yourself a question: For what moment today am I the most grateful? Then think on that moment and what it meant to you.

Other ways you might ask this question are to think about the times when you gave and received the most love, or the moment when you felt most alive, or the high point of the day. They suggest that when you do this practice on a regular basis, you learn God's will for your life, all that is possible, and you will do more things in order to live in that place of gratitude. There is a famous quote about gratitude by Melody Beattie: "Gratitude unlocks the fullness of life. It turns what we have into enough and more. It turns denial into acceptance, chaos into order, confusion into clarity. It can turn a meal into a feast, a house into a home, a stranger into a friend. Gratitude helps us to make sense of the past, it brings peace for today, and it creates a vision for tomorrow."

The second thing to do when you wake up at 2 a.m. is to say thank you.

The third thing is to acknowledge that maybe God is bothering you, and you need the quiet in order to pay attention. A bed is where you come face to face with what really matters because it is too dark for most of our usual, shallow distractions to work. In her book, Learning to Walk in the Dark, my favourite author, Barbara Brown Taylor tells a wonderful story. A friend says he turns over and over in bed, and when he wakes up, he is wrapped in the sheets and the blankets like a bandage. One night, his wife tried to get some of the covers back, yanking at them and telling him to go back to sleep.

"I can't," he whispered. "I think it's God that's bothering me."

"Well, God's not bothering me," she said, "so get up and pray, but do it somewhere else."

When we wake and our minds are filled with all the anxieties of living, the fear of too much, the fear of too little, the fear of success, the fear of failure, there is in that moment, an invitation to see the time as a gift. We can acknowledge that God is bothering us in such a way that we are being summoned to trust, confront the fear, take a breath, and keep going.

Using these bothering moments as prayer time reminds us that what happens in our lives is important, but connecting our life to God's life is even more important. When you wake up bothered, and fear overtakes you, it helps to repeat something familiar, like The Lord's Prayer, or the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm: "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil." I will not be afraid. When you find yourself waking at inconvenient hours and you start to think about all the things you would rather not think about, you have the choice to see the time as an opportunity to really listen. We can trust the rhythm instead of opposing it.

Tomorrow, early in the morning, when I wake up to see a clock saying 2:07 a.m., I will try to remember the lesson that Jesus gave to Nicodemus, a fellow insomniac, that God's desire for the world is relationship, ever constant love. God's hope for God's people is a response to complete the circle, by resting, and offering gratitude, and trusting enough to remember that we are not alone. We live in God's world, where darkness exists, but we do not have to be afraid. God loves you, sweet child. Sleep in peace.

**Sources used:**

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