

Sermon Archive 197

Sunday 15 April, 2018

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lessons: Psalm 4

Luke 24: 36-48

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



I never found the classic approach of counting sheep very helpful. I guess I can understand how it's meant to work. You give your mind to the boring task of counting, and you find yourself distracted from the many thoughts that were keeping sleep at bay. I just found that my sheep weren't interesting enough to keep my attention. Back came the thoughts.

At one point I memorised a few sleep texts, with the idea of using them as sleep mantras - you know, short poems I could recite to myself over and over again to absorb the many thoughts - wee spiritual petitions on the theme of sleep. One I particularly loved was a verse from Robert Herrick's Litany to the Holy Spirit: "When the house doth sigh and weep, and the world is drown'd in sleep, yet mine eyes the watch do keep, Sweet Spirit, comfort me". It was beautiful, but it didn't particularly help me sleep.

In the end, the approach I took was basically to give up, get up, and do something else: the vacuuming, writing a letter, anything really - until I became just so tired that sleep insisted. Although an indirect approach, it seemed more effective than lying there with my thoughts and getting frustrated. Thoughts. Thoughts. Circular thoughts, repeating thoughts, insisting thoughts, nagging thoughts, troubling thoughts, too many thoughts!

The psalmist's mind is full of thoughts - such that he's crying out to God for "room". Who cries out for room, other than one who's feeling hemmed in? Squeezed, trapped - like he's surrounded by thoughts - too many thoughts.

Feeding the thoughts are the people among whom he lives - people described as loving vain words, seeking after lies, shaming his honour. It sounds like there's been some kind of character assassination going on - a gossip campaign. Why would they say such false things? Why do they hate me? Hurt kills sleep.

And the trouble with false speech, with slander, is that generally it goes on behind your back, in the hearing of you know not who. How do you deal with lies you're not aware of? "What can I do about it" kills sleep. "Wondering whether there are any faithful people you can lean on - unless if they've all heard the lies and turned away" kills sleep. "Trying to control what others think, say and do" kills sleep. "What have I got to do to make you love me" kills sleep. "Grappling with things that we don't understand and over which we have very little power" kills sleep. So no sleep for the psalmist tonight.

Tonight, when bed time comes to Christchurch, there will be people kept up with thoughts. And some of them will be thoughts about cruel words and unfair speech. They'll be about injustice and hurt. But I suspect that more of the thoughts will emanate from that sense of not quite knowing what we're dealing with, but feeling disempowered before whatever it is. Even if I could understand it fully, what on earth am I going to do with it? I don't know what to do!

In his commentary on Psalm number 4, James Limburg uses the phrase "babysitting the world". He writes *"It was one of those nights when I was lying awake, babysitting the world. Babysitting the world indeed. Maybe you've had such nights. You are worried about the kids, the grandkids, the bills, your health, not to mention Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, and climate change! So you can't get to sleep."*

The truth is that the world needs a kind of babysitting. We need people who will take the life of the world seriously, and feel a sense of responsibility about how we live in it together. We do need people to care about the children, to care about the elderly. We do need people to think about the environment, the rising seas, the changing climate. We need people who work hard on what to do about Syria - that huge, complex mess of Syria. And indeed people of Christian faith particularly, who believe that we are one another's keepers, have a special social consciousness about all that. And people of Christian faith particularly, who have heard the words of the prophets, do have a special calling towards justice - things being right. We need to care for the baby. But there's something in that image of babysitting that's a quiet caution. As the baby grows, it won't be happy to be babysat. In fact, if the non-baby continues to be treated like a baby (swaddled, kept close, contained in a play pen), there's going to be a harvest of protest, resistance and resentment. The world will insist on autonomy. The world will push back - and we'll sink in the overwhelming sense of not being in control, disempowerment. I don't

understand this. I don't know what I'm meant to do. I feel disempowered. No sleep tonight - no! Sleep is killed.

The psalmist seeks release from this. He wants peace and a decent night's sleep. "There are many who say", he says, "O, that we might see some good! Let the light of your face shine on us, O Lord!" The first step towards release, for the psalmist, is the psalmist's acknowledgement that there are *many* seeking release. Yes, he's hemmed in, trapped, troubled by many thoughts, But he's not the only one. There is a community of the sleepless. Thank God; I'd got to the point of thinking it was only me. Lonely at night. Now, when I give up trying to sleep, turn on the lights and set to the vacuuming, I notice there are lights on in the house next door. Mine is not the only house that looks like it's occupied by a shift-worker - even though it's not. Many are seeking freedom from the things we don't quite understand, the things that make us feel powerless, the hurt and the wrong. As I feel a little less isolated, a little less singled out, is sleep drawing nearer?

The second step, for the psalmist, is to call upon the people to offer right sacrifices and put their trust in God. Do what is right, and give the rest to God. There's a sense here of handing over, in trust, to God, of all the things we know we don't control. They used to say "let go and let God". And that fitted in well with some of the psalms, and some of the sayings of Jesus: "fear not little flock"; "take my yoke upon you, for my yoke is easy and my burden is light". Just do the right you can do, understand what you can understand; and surrender the rest to God; then maybe peace and sleep will come.

I guess part of the difficulty with that, is that God may in fact be on the list of things that confuse us, of things we can't understand, of matters that leave us feeling out of control. A case in point: Jesus comes to his disciples, in the mystery of the resurrection, and greets them with peace. "Peace be with you", he says. "When the house doth sigh and weep, and the world is drown'd in sleep, yet mine eyes the watch do keep, Jesus says "Peace be with you".

Their reaction, though, to his granting of peace, is to be startled and terrified. We're told that they're terrified because they think they're seeing a ghost. They don't understand what they're seeing. Their world view can't accommodate a risen, forgiving, peace-wishing Christ. I don't understand. I don't know what to do with this. I know what to do with *ghosts*. I know how to run and hide and fear and be startled by the weird and unworldly. There's

room in my world for **that**. But how can I be expected to hand over my helplessness, my many thoughts, to One who makes my heart frightened and full of doubt? The night of the soul. The deep questions we don't know the answers to. The "why would God allow that" questions. They keep us up!

With gentle patience, Jesus responds to the disciples' fright. He asks them to see his hands and feet. He asks them to touch him - to feel his humanity - to be reassured of his humanity. This is not the realm of the ghostly. This is the God of love, coming again, wishing peace for the people. This is God coming again, to open up the scriptures - to help people like us hear psalms like we heard today, to help people hear the prophets, and come to be at peace with who Jesus is, what he's done, what he's said - "peace be with you". This is God coming again, offering the vision of One who may be trusted - not feared, but trusted.

You have put gladness in my heart - more than when grain and wine abound. I will both lie down and sleep in peace; for you alone, O Lord, make me lie down in safety.

-ooOoo-

I never found the classic approach of counting sheep very helpful. I guess I can understand how it's meant to work. At one point I memorised a few texts, with the idea of using them as sleep mantras. At another point I gave up on sleep, did the vacuuming instead. Hurt. Injustice. Powerlessness. Fear before responsibility. A feeling we've somehow been locked into babysitting.

Jesus says "Peace be with you". "Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts.

I will both lie down and sleep in peace; for you alone, O Lord, make me lie down in safety.

A moment of quiet.

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