

Acts 12:1-9
Pastor Paul Horn

You will sleep soundly tonight... and on your death bed

It was about this time that King Herod (Agrippa I – grandson of Herod the Great) arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them. 2 He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword (beheaded). 3 When he saw that this pleased the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter also. This happened during the Feast of Unleavened Bread. 4 After arresting him, he put him in prison, handing him over to be guarded by four squads of four soldiers each. Herod intended to bring him out for public trial after the Passover. 5 So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him. 6 The night before Herod was to bring him to trial, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries stood guard at the entrance. 7 Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared and a light shone in the cell. He struck Peter on the side and woke him up. “Quick, get up!” he said, and the chains fell off Peter’s wrists.

8 Then the angel said to him, “Put on your clothes and sandals.” And Peter did so. “Wrap your cloak around you and follow me,” the angel told him. 9 Peter followed him out of the prison, but he had no idea that what the angel was doing was really happening; he thought he was seeing a vision. 10 They passed the first and second guards and came to the iron gate leading to the city. It opened for them by itself, and they went through it. When they had walked the length of one street, suddenly the angel left him.

11 Then Peter came to himself and said, “Now I know without a doubt that the Lord sent his angel and rescued me from Herod’s clutches and from everything the Jewish people were anticipating.” 12 When this had dawned on him, he went to the house of Mary the mother of John, also called Mark, where many people had gathered and were praying. 13 Peter knocked at the outer entrance, and a servant girl named Rhoda came to answer the door. 14 When she recognized Peter’s voice, she was so overjoyed she ran back without opening it and exclaimed, “Peter is at the door!” 15 “You’re out of your mind,” they told her. When she kept insisting that it was so, they said, “It must be his angel.” 16 But Peter kept on knocking, and when they opened the door and saw him, they were astonished. 17 Peter motioned with his hand for them to be quiet and described how the Lord had brought him out of prison. “Tell James (the Lord’s brother – see Gal 1:19) and the brothers about this,” he said, and then he left for another place. 18 In the morning, there was no small commotion among the soldiers as to what had become of Peter. 19 After Herod had a thorough search made for him and did not find him, he cross-examined the guards and ordered that they be executed.

Job 7:3,4

“Nights of misery have been assigned to me. When I lie down I think, ‘How long before I get up?’ The night drags on, and I toss till dawn.”

Those words sound familiar to you, don't they? Because you've been there, haven't you? The tossing and turning, and no matter how hard you try, you just can't get to sleep. Well...what do you think of this – "The night before Herod was to bring him to trial, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries stood guard at the entrance." (Acts 12:6) You're probably thinking, "Peter, how could you have been sleeping so soundly – so deep in asleep that the angel who appeared to you had to strike you on the side and say, "Wake up!" You were about to go on trial before the man who had just executed James, the brother of the Apostle John. The only reason this man had you arrested was to make a savvy political move – to pacify the Jewish leaders and people."

You have to remember that the Jews hated the Herod family because, although they were the rulers of Jewish provinces, the Herods were not true Jewish patriots. They did more to serve the wishes of Rome than the Jews. The Herods had to do something to please both parties. So, why not cut the head off the dragon? Why not put to death the leader of the Christian movement, which the Jewish leaders were so against?

"So, Peter, how is it that you were so sound asleep? Didn't it frighten you that the very next morning, you could have suffered the same fate as your friend, James? You probably would have died that next morning and you were sleeping!?"

My friends, you ask good questions of me. But I would like to turn around and ask you... is there any reason why you shouldn't be sleeping soundly on the eve of your death? Is there any reason why you shouldn't sleep soundly every night? Or... are you letting other things drive sleep from your eyes?

As you lay your head down on your pillow, is your conscience weighed down by the guilt of past sins? Are you allowing Satan's accusations to get the best of you, trying to get you to doubt God's love for you? Are you burdened by the anxieties of life - your health, school, job, retirement, relationships? Before the service this morning, your pastor informed me that many of you have family members who are very sick, some who are near death. Is it your worrying for them that is causing sleep to flee from your eyes? Are you afraid of what the future might hold for you and your family? Have you contemplated your own mortality? Your pastor told me about the youth confirmation class this past week. Pastor Horn spoke to the class about the promise they are about to make in a few weeks, that they would be willing to suffer death, rather than forsake their faith and the Word of God. Are you hesitating in anticipation of making that important promise?

Why? Have you forgotten God's promises to you? Have you forgotten his promise to cast all anxieties on him because he cares for you? (1Pet 5:7) Have you forgotten his promises to spread his wings over you and protect you? (Ps 91:4) Have you forgotten his promises to provide you with everything that you need for your body, just as he does for the birds of the air and the flowers of the field? (Matt 6:25-34) Have you already forgotten about Easter Sunday morning, the promise he made to you at your baptism or what he offers you in the Lord's Supper?

Then shame on you! I can say that to you because I am not without fault. If you remember, I was the one who ran away from my Lord in the garden, after I had pledged to die with him. I was the one who denied knowing my Savior in the courtyard, who hid behind locked doors after his death, afraid of what might happen to me. Even though Jesus had promised me, “He who stands firm to the end will be saved. Blessed are you when people hate you and persecute you because of me.” I disregard those promises.

God’s law reflected my sins, like when I would kneel down on the banks of the Sea of Galilee in the morning and see my reflection in the water as washed my face. I could see every imperfection. The law pointed out my sins. You know what I’m talking about, when you wake up in the morning and look in the mirror. You don’t always look so good. (Rom 3:20) God’s law points it all out; your forgotten promises, resulting from neglect of his Word, your lack of trust in his promises. God’s law also points out our deserved condemnation for our sins...

Pastor Horn told me a silly story about some lady who jumped into a polar bear display at a zoo. We didn’t have polar bears in Palestine, but from what I’ve heard, polar bears aren’t cute and cuddly and drink Coca-Cola. They would have mauled her to death if zoo workers had not thrown life preservers and pulled her to safety. God’s law decrees certain death for us who have sinned, we have been mauled by our sins, by Satan who accuses us, and death has its claws wrapped tightly around us and will hold us down forever (Rom 5:12).

But there is good news, my friends. Jesus Christ has thrown more than a life preserver on a rope to you and me. He has scooped us up with his Almighty hands and rescued us from the pit of Satan and hell, from the claws of death and our sins. He rescued you by allowing his body and soul to be mauled by the pain and suffering of hell, to receive the punishment you and I deserve for our sins of fear, of unfaithfulness, of failing to put our trust in his promises, and so he sank down to the pit of death, in our place.

But the Father pulled his Son out of death’s pit. On that first Easter Sunday morning I ran into the tomb and saw with my own eyes that it was empty. On that first Easter Sunday Jesus himself appeared to me and the other disciples in the flesh. He ate and drank with us. He spoke words of reassurance to us to prove that he was physically alive. He was not a ghost! And that he had completed the rescue of all people from their sins, from death and hell by his death and resurrection.

Jesus appeared to us to remind us that he is our forgiving Savior. He is patient. He knows that his people forget his promises, because they are sinners. When he appeared to the women, did he rebuke them for bringing spices, expecting to anoint a dead body? Did he chastise us, his disciples, because we were huddled behind closed doors? Did he ask the question, “Why weren’t you at the tomb to greet me when I arose?” No! He said, “Peace be with you!” Did he yell at Thomas for doubting? No! He made a point to reassure his dear disciple that he was alive. When he appeared to me, I who had abandoned my Lord

in the garden, I who denied knowing my Savior - my Savior came to me to set my mind at rest, so that I would know my sins against him were forgiven.

He appears to you today, my dear friends, and speaks to you through his Scripture and through his Sacraments, to reassure you that your sins of forgetfulness and unfaithfulness are forgiven. He reminds you, "All of you who were baptized into Christ, have clothed yourselves with Christ." (Gal 3:26) Cherish your baptism. Take comfort in your baptism, when the Holy Spirit covered over your sins with Christ's atoning blood. He reminds you, "There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." (Rom 8:1) That's the promise Jesus gives you because you have been baptized. You stand in God's sight forgiven, innocent, and holy, because you stand in Christ Jesus' life, death and resurrection. What is more, this is the promise he gives you, "The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Rom 6:23) Jesus reminds you that your rescue from the grave and your eternity in heaven is a gift to you through baptism.

When you are lying on your bed at night, tossing and turning, remember the promises God makes to you through his Word and the guarantee he made to you through your baptism. Allow him to lift the burden of the guilt of your sin, for he placed it on Christ Jesus. Remember his promise that he has washed away sin and hell through water and the Word. That will allow you to sleep soundly tonight and every night, for your heart is at rest. You are at peace with God through Christ. When the anxieties of this life overwhelm you, and they cause sleep to flee from your eyes, cast those anxieties on him for he promises, "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you." (Luke 11:9) Place your cares and concerns and worries into the hands of the Almighty God, who can do anything. Let him take care of it. Then you can say with the Psalm writer (Ps 4:8), "I will lie down and sleep in peace, for you alone, O LORD, make me dwell in safety."

I would like to address that question you asked of me earlier - Why did I sleep so soundly on the eve of my trial and what would have been a certain execution? Jesus had made promises to me. He had said, "Do not worry about what to say or how to say it when you are arrested, for at that time you will be given what to say, for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you. (Matt 10:19,20) Jesus had also promised me that I would die a martyr's death, which means I had no reason to fear abandoning my Lord again, for the Lord would keep me strong and steadfast, and I would die a death that would glorify God. (John 21:18,19) That's why I slept. I had nothing to be afraid of the next morning. I put my trust in his promises, like this one from the Psalms, "In God I trust; I will not be afraid. What can mortal man do to me?" (Ps 56:4,11) But King Herod sure had a surprise that next morning. The Lord sent an angel to miraculously rescue me from danger. He had more work for me to do. Even if I had died that next day, the Lord would rescue me from death and my grave, because he saved me from my sins. Either way, I would have won.

I can tell you that you too will sleep soundly on your deathbed. Because Christ promises in his Word that when you die on this earth, your soul will live on in heaven with Jesus;

more than that, when Judgment Day ends this world forever, your body will be resurrected by God from the dead and join your soul in heaven forever. His promises will make you confident on your Last Day, “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die.” (John 11:25,26) Ultimately for you and me, death is victory. Death is rescue from every evil attack in this life. (2Tim 4:18) Death is your step to life eternal with Jesus and all the saints.

So sleep soundly tonight. Take to heart Jesus’ promises to you as you pray, “Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray thee, Lord, my soul to keep, if I should die before I wake, I pray thee, Lord, my soul to take. And this I ask for Jesus’ sake. Amen.”