
Sing We Now of Christmas

"The Sleep of the Infant Jesus"

Mark 4:35-41

Christmas Eve – December 24, 2005 – 11 pm
Northway Christian Church, Dallas, Texas

Dr. Douglas B. Skinner

*Silent Night, Holy Night, all is calm, all is bright
Round yon virgin mother and child,
holy infant so tender and mild,
Sleep in heavenly peace,
Sleep in heavenly peace.*

*Away in a manger, no crib for a bed,
the little Lord Jesus laid down his sweet head.
The stars in the sky looked down where he lay,
the little Lord Jesus **asleep** on the hay.*

*What child is this who, laid to rest, on Mary's lap is **sleeping**?
Whom angels greet with anthems sweet, while shepherds watch are keeping?
This, this is Christ the King, whom shepherds guard and angels sing:
haste, haste to bring Him laud, the babe, the Son of Mary.*



Did you know that despite what we sing, that there are no Biblical references to the baby Jesus sleeping in the Bethlehem manger? Oh, it's pretty safe to think that He did. It's been my experience with little babies that they're only good at four things: (1) sleeping, (2) crying, (3) eating, and (4) one other thing. And so, even though the Bible doesn't explicitly tell us that the baby Jesus slumbered through the bedlam of that first Christmas Eve, He no doubt did.

No, to catch Jesus actually dozing you've got to go to that story that was read just a moment ago from Mark chapter 4. This is the only reference in the Gospels to the sleep of the Savior. In fact, the Hebrew Scriptures are pretty insistent that our God neither slumbers nor sleeps. Psalm 121 tells us that the God who keeps us doesn't ever fall asleep (verses 3 & 4). And then Psalm 127

quickly adds that it's because we have this insomniac God who is watching over us that we don't have to lose sleep ourselves (verse 2).

Andy Mangum, one of my little brothers in ministry, likes to say that it doesn't really bother him when he sees people falling asleep in his church. They're obviously not getting enough sleep at home, he says, no doubt because they're worried about all of their responsibilities and obligations. But when they come to church and hear about God, Andy says, they can fall asleep quite easily because they know they don't have to worry! That kind of sleeping is an act of faith. And I'm pretty sure that this is the kind of sleep that Jesus was getting on that cushion in the stern of that boat in the story from Mark chapter 4.

We sleep because we get tired as human beings. And the allusions in our Christmas carols to the baby Jesus sleeping in Bethlehem's manger as well as the account of Jesus sleeping in the bow of that boat are reminders that Jesus was a human being too. In fact, this is what we celebrate and proclaim here tonight – the Word became flesh and dwelt among us (John 1:4). We call this idea the “*Incarnation*.” It means that God Himself has shared our life in this world with all of its joys and struggles. And it matters because it makes God a participant and not just a spectator in what we have to go through.

Because the Bible tells us its stories of Christ's birth with attention to such miraculous details as that mysterious shining star and the majestic angels' song, I suppose that it's possible for us to miss the otherwise utter ordinariness of this whole moment. This is why in one of his Christmas sermons the great Protestant Reformer Martin Luther told his congregation to “*meditate upon the Nativity just as we see it happening in our own babies*” (39). You see, he didn't want the supernatural glow on these familiar stories that signal to us their cosmic significance to get in the way of the cold, the blood and the dirt of that real birth in an animal pen. “*He was a true Baby, with flesh, blood, hands and legs,*” Luther explained, “*He slept, cried, and did everything else that a baby does*” (39).

Jesus had to sleep because He was fully human, and that's important for us to remember, especially on this night when we have gathered here to celebrate His real birth. But as we all know, having to sleep and being able to sleep are sometimes two very different things. We have to sleep because our bodies get tired and eventually quit. But even when they do, if our minds don't quit as well, we will wind up tossing and turning all night long. A couple of years ago I went through a long stretch of not sleeping very well at all. I was tired, and eventually became completely exhausted, but I was worried about a number of things and whenever I tried to go to sleep they swirled inside my head and stirred me up so that I couldn't sleep. I finally had to go get some help with those problems. And when I did, not surprisingly sleep almost immediately followed.

In that story of the Savior's sleep in Mark chapter 4 we heard read tonight, we were told that Jesus was snoozing through a storm. The wind was howling, the waves were beating, the boat was swamping, the disciples were swearing and the Savior was apparently snoring. They had to rouse Him from a deep sleep, and even as they did they anxiously questioned His concern for their welfare. How could He be sleeping at a time like that? Didn't He care that they were on the verge of perishing? And so the Gospel tells us that Jesus first stilled

the storm at sea, and then He turned His attention to stilling of the storm that was in the hearts of His friends. “*Why were you afraid?*” Christ asked them. “Where was your faith?” He wondered. He was in His sleep. It was an act of faith.

Now, understand, Jesus was not naïve. He knew the damage that a storm could do. “*He knew only too well the horrendous reality of evil (let loose in this world) and the dread depth of the human predicament... (Remember) in Jesus’ day, anesthesia and antibiotics were unknown; pain was unmitigated pain, and suffering was unmitigated suffering*” (Henry 26). He was fully human; subject to all of the dangers and threats that we still face today. And still He could sleep through the storm, not because there was no threat, but rather because He knew where His true security finally lay.

And so this Christmas Eve I want to affirm the sleep of the Savior. As our anthem tonight put it so beautifully –

*Here ‘mid the sheep and oxen mild,
Sleep, sleep, sleep, my little Child.
Thousand seraphim, thousand cherubim
come from heaven above
to guard the Lord of love...
Sleep, sleep, my little Son...
Sleep now, Lord of love.*

The sleep of the Savior is a sign of His full identification with us. He knows firsthand how hard things can be for us in this world; how it can wear us down and wear us out. And if that’s all there was to the Savior’s sleep, that would be enough. But there’s even more to it than that. You see, the sleep of the Savior is also an act of faith. He could doze in the face of destruction because He knew that no matter what might come that He was being held, and when we learn this truth we will start to sleep the sleep of faith as well.

Brennan Manning says that this is what Christmas is for, and this is what Christmas is about. We don’t have to live in fear. We don’t have to dread the storm. We don’t have to worry about whether there is someone there, and if that someone cares. Brennan says that here tonight “a sonorous, saving voice” is speaking to anyone who will become quiet enough to listen. And it’s saying –

Sshh! Be still. All is well. I am here. Do not be afraid. The world is no longer in the hands of the Evil One but in the arms of a loving shepherd. In the end everything will be all right. Nothing can harm you permanently. No suffering is irrevocable, no loss lasting; no defeat is more than transitory, no disappointment is conclusive. Nothing can ever separate us – not troubles, worries, persecutions, not lack of food or clothes, not attacks or invasions. There is absolutely nothing in life or death that will ever come between you and the love of God made visible before our eyes in this manger tonight. (156)

So, good night... and sleep tight...

Sources

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Henry, Carl F.H. "*An Eye on the Cradle*." Christianity Today. November 6, 1987.

Manning, Brennan. Lion and Lamb. Chosen Books: 1986.