

“Awesome”
Christmas Eve Sermon, December 24, 2020
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Luke 1:57-66

I loved being a kid. Every little thing brought excitement and joy. Back in the day, the smallest thing would set off the bells in my head and I would get caught up in the anticipation of...

- Mowing the yard in the 100 degree heat...because my dad said when I finished the yard, we would all go to the local A&W drive-in and get root beer floats!
- Driving out in the country to the Dairy Farm of Mr. Asay, our dear family friend. It was always a fine time when Mr. Asay would walk us among the cows and we'd see their tails swishing away the flies and machines milking them and we would run and play with Mickey, their great, big friendly dog.
- Going to watch a high school basketball game. We lived in a small town and high school sports were huge...and so were the players. For whatever reason, our little town had a whole slew of tall basketball players, 6' 7", 6'8", 6'10". And when you are eight or nine years old, they might as well be twelve feet tall. Because my dad was a high school teacher he had a special pass and we would get to walk down on the court near these larger than life players. Talk about a big thrill.
- Our cousins coming to visit. My parents moved to California leaving their family in Pennsylvania and Ohio. But my mom's sister, our Aunt Polly, lived about four hours away. When you don't have extended family near you, a visit really stands out. We would sit on the front steps of our house, looking down our street, just waiting for Uncle Leon's station wagon to turn the corner. We always started looking too soon...like three hours too soon. It felt like our cousins would never arrive. We would get discouraged...think they forgot about us...get grumpy...pout a

little bit...maybe even argue among ourselves...there were five of us after all...and then just when we had decided to give up and forget about the whole thing, someone would shout, “Here they come!”

I loved being a kid. Every little thing brought excitement and joy. Back in the day, the smallest thing would set off the bells in my head and I would get caught up in the anticipation. But not everything was small. Some things were big. For those things, for those special things, we would get so excited we could not sleep. *We* was my brother Barry and me, with whom I shared a bedroom until I was 19 years old. Dad took us to the Los Angeles Coliseum to watch our first pro football game, the Los Angeles Rams vs. the San Francisco 49ers. We didn't even try to go to sleep that night. Good luck with that. We were so wound up. Or when our local YMCA would sponsor a trip to Disneyland...this was before Disneyworld...and our little town would fill up five or six charter buses and leave at 4 am. There was no danger of us oversleeping and missing the bus. We never went to sleep. All night before our trip we would be talking about which ride we would go on first, what snacks we would buy, whether we were tall enough for the big roller coaster rides, and what souvenirs we would buy with our limited amount of money, and most importantly, whether the abominable snowman on the Matterhorn was real or not.

Not too long ago I was walking on the beach right down at Misquamicut. I was thinking back on those nights when as a child I couldn't fall asleep. Those weren't bad nights. I have had plenty of sleepless nights that were no fun at all. But the nights I am talking about weren't like that. The nights I am talking about were special. There was something we were looking forward to that made sleep impossible, in a good way. So as I walked along the beach, with the waves crashing, the wind blowing, the sun shining, and my mind filled not just with good memories but the best memories, I thought to myself, “What's the best night's sleep I *never* had?”

- Was it the night before the first day of school, when I was so happy to be back with all my friends?
- Was it the night before the last day of school, when I was so happy that it was time for summer vacation?
- Was it the night before our championship basketball game?
- Was it the night before we went to Disneyland?
- Was it the night before we went to the Los Angeles Coliseum?

Each one of those was a good night's sleep I never had. But none of them was the *best* night's sleep I never had. Hands down, the best night's sleep I *never* had was Christmas Eve. My guess is that I'm not the only one who would say Christmas Eve is the best night's sleep they never had. There is a reason, after all, why the poem "Twas the Night Before Christmas" is so famous. Visions of sugarplums dance in our heads. In just a few hours we will gather around the tree, for many a tree filled with presents. Stockings will be hung by the chimney with care. And it's not just the hope that St. Nicholas soon will be there. Often Christmas is when those who are nearest and dearest to our hearts gather together. All of these things are contributing factors to why for so many, the best night's sleep they never had is on Christmas Eve.

One of the things that keep us awake on Christmas Eve is that we know what we know. We are the blessed recipients of the stories about the life of Jesus Christ. We know how Jesus came and lived among us as the Word of God who became flesh. We know how he touched people. We know the healing Jesus brought. Because we know who Jesus is and what Jesus can do, we would have a hard time sleeping if we knew we were going to meet Jesus.

Think what a difficult life it must have been for people before they met Jesus. Imagine a leper. Leprosy was a terrible skin disease. It not only looked unattractive, it carried with it a stigma of being unclean. There are places in the Old Testament where a leper is told that to make sure others don't approach them and accidentally become unclean

through contact, the leper has to shout out, “Unclean! Unclean!” After yet another day of wandering alone through the streets of a city, or just as likely lurking in the shadows out of shame at their unclean condition, can you picture that lonely leper finding a place to drop down to sleep? He had nothing to live for, nothing to bring joy. But one night while the leper slept Jesus drew near. The leper woke that day and heard rumors that Jesus was soon to pass by. The leper woke that day and heard that this man named Jesus had the power to heal. Jesus had the power to heal. But what the leper needed to know was whether Jesus had the will to heal someone such as he, someone who was unclean, someone who was literally untouchable. You can almost hear the fear of rejection in his voice as the leper cried out to Jesus, “Lord, if you are willing you can make me clean.”

If he only knew what was about to happen, do you think that leper could have fallen asleep the night before? If he only knew that Jesus would look him in the eye and cast away any doubt. If he only knew Jesus would say, “I am willing. Be clean”. If he only knew that as Jesus spoke his words of blessing would be accompanied by something even more profound, even more compassionate, even more significant. If he only knew Jesus, the pure and holy Son of God would reach out his hand and touch the leper, flesh on flesh, skin on skin. If the leper only knew any of that, if the leper knew all of that, do you think he could have fallen asleep the night before Christ came into his life? The leper did not know what the next day would hold, and so he spent the night in a sleep that was weighed down with sadness and emptiness. But we know what happened the next day. And so when we lay down on Christmas Eve, knowing what Jesus can do for an unclean person, knowing that Jesus is willing, knowing that Jesus reaches out and touches, knowing that Jesus heals and makes people whole, how in the world can we sleep on the night before the birth of Jesus Christ?

As we approach Christmas Eve, before you get comfortable and lay your head down for a long winter’s nap, I wonder if you would help me tuck in some dear friends. This Christmas we have opened up a

dormitory and provided a bed for all those who had the privilege of waking up one glorious morning and meeting Jesus face to face. Imagine tucking them in the night before they met Jesus. Imagine they have no idea how their world will be rocked the next day. Their next day is going to be a game changer, and they are clueless. Because they are clueless they are hopeless. We aren't going to tell them what awaits them with the rising of the sun. Instead, we will keep that a secret. Part of the beauty of the gospel stories is the surprise, the sense of wonder and awe. We don't want to rob our dear friends of that great joy as we tuck them in. We don't want to rob them of that joy because that is a joy we will share.

So we walk past the bunks in the dormitory.

- We pull the covers up on a man who has been paralyzed and is unable to walk. As we pull the covers up around his chin we pull his eyelids down, not telling him his vacant stare is about to see the world in a whole new way.
- A woman who is known around town as being a sinful person is weeping quietly into her pillow. We whisper some kind words of encouragement, barely able to conceal our tears as next to her pillow is a jar of perfume. Tomorrow she will meet someone who captures her heart and that oil will anoint the feet of Jesus. Tomorrow she will find out the great gift of forgiveness.
- There is a name tag above one of the bunks that says Levi the Tax Collector. As if we needed a name tag to identify Levi. His bed is cluttered with coins, the fruit of his labors collecting excess taxes. But the fruit of his labor means he has made lots of enemies. His back is turned to us and we hear him talking to himself. His words are a desperate lament. "How can my life be so full of money, and so empty of meaning? If I could just meet someone who gave me another chance. If I could just meet someone who showed me a new way..."
- There is a group of beds all pulled together, where twelve men are talking rapidly about the things left for them. They have found

tickets for a boat ride on the Sea of Galilee. There is a fishing net that says, "You will need this tomorrow." There are coupons for a free fish dinner, with all the fresh bread you can eat. They are puzzled by the towels they have each been given. These look like the kind of towels you use to wash other people's feet, but why would they need that kind of a towel? That is the kind of a towel a servant uses. Those twelve. They are about to embark on the journey of a lifetime. Someday they will look back on those boat rides and those fish fries and that towel that does the work of a servant, and they will look at that fishing net and remember the day Jesus said, "Follow me and I will make you fishers of men."

- While the twelve have all pulled their bunks together and are comparing notes, there is one lonely and isolated bed far off in a corner, all alone. We already know about the leper. We already know he was considered unclean. It doesn't surprise us that he is all alone. But it breaks our heart. Just as it will break the heart of Jesus. We don't say a word as we walk by but we pray. "Hold on, hold on, hold on until the morning. You are about to receive the touch of the master's hand."
- As we come near the end of the row of bunks we smell a terrible odor. There is a body on one of the last bunks, but instead of being covered in a blanket, the body is shrouded in grave clothes, wrapped up for burial. This poor guy isn't sleeping. He is dead. He has been that way for a few days. Suddenly we realize who is lying on that bunk. His name is Lazarus, a disciple dearly loved by Jesus. It was upon hearing the news of the death of Lazarus that Jesus said his immortal words, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in will live, even though they die; and whoever lives in me and believes in me will never die." We are the fortunate ones who know how this story turns out. Jesus goes to the tomb of Lazarus. He speaks into the darkness of death and says, "Lazarus, come forth." So we tenderly tap his chest and say, "Lazarus, don't get too comfortable in these grave clothes. Tomorrow they won't fit."

All these bunk beds in this vast dormitory are filled with people who have no idea what the morning holds. They are each about to meet Jesus. If they only knew, if they only knew, they could never fall asleep. They don't know...but we do. We know what happens when Jesus comes. Stepping out of that dormitory we stare up at the night sky. We know what we are looking for. We are looking for the star that shined brightly over the place in Bethlehem where Jesus was born. All those dear friends in the dormitory don't know a thing about that star. We do, and so we look to the east, with great anticipation.

But before we can spot the star we stumble upon a final group that has gathered. They are not asleep in the dormitory. They are sitting outside, talking, planning, preparing. It is a group of women. Though they are busy at work, we notice there is no laughter in their talking. There is no joy in their planning. There is no hope in their preparation. They are fast at work with spices and perfumes. We realize who they are and what they are doing. It is the women preparing to go to the tomb of Jesus the next morning. Their dear Lord has died. He died right before their eyes. They watched as he was placed in his tomb. And now tomorrow they have accepted the heartbreaking task of anointing the dead body of Jesus, the one who had stirred such hope in their hearts. Despite working late into the night, you don't hear one single complaint. They will work all through the night. They might as well. There is no chance they could sleep on this night of desperation and darkness. For them this will be the worst night's sleep they ever had. Their pain is so real, their grief so raw, their sadness so suffocating, we wish we had permission to say, "Dear women, weeping may remain for the night, but joy will come in the morning." No one will tell them that tonight. We leave them alone with their tears and their sorrow. We leave them alone because we know, we know, we know the incredible great and good news that will greet them in the morning. We know this story.

“On the first day of the week, very early in the morning, the women took the spices they had prepared and went to the tomb. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but

when they entered, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. While they were wondering about this, suddenly two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning stood beside them. In their fright the women bowed down with their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, ‘Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; he has risen!’” (Luke 24:1-5)

Why do I call Christmas Eve the best night’s sleep I never had? Because I’ve been to that dormitory, and I know what those dear friends do not know. And what I know is what you know. We know about the leper, we know about the lame, we know about Jesus walking on water and calming storms, we know about loaves and fishes, we know about forgiveness, and we know about the nets that tell us we have been called to be fishers of men. We know about Lazarus and his discarded grave clothes. And we know how good it turns out for those weeping women. When we see that star shining low over the stable in Bethlehem, we know what’s coming. We know who is coming. Christ is coming. Jesus Christ is coming. That manger is about to hold the greatest gift ever given, the Beloved Son of God.

Now I don’t really wish upon any of you a night of no sleep, even on Christmas Eve. In fact, I hope that knowing what we know, we can all lay down our heads and rest in peace. I hope we can rest in the peace that knows we are not alone, the peace that knows death does not win, the peace that is assured for those who trust in Jesus, the peace that passes all understanding. I hope we can all rest in the peace that we find in Jesus Christ, our Lord and our Savior.

But if you do you find yourself so filled with excitement, so restless in anticipation, so eager for the sun to rise then I hope that you too will have the best night’s sleep you never had. I hope you might even open your window, for there is a song that floats across the night sky, all the way from far off fields in the Holy Land right into our homes

and right into our hearts. There is an angel crying out words filled with wonder and awe.”

“Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the city of David a Savior has been born. He is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”

Try to sleep when you hear that kind of good news of great joy. Try to sleep when a whole choir of angels, the heavenly host, praises God saying,

“Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.”

Maybe that is what happened to those shepherds living out in the fields. They heard all this good news of great joy, the flapping of angel wings and the bright lights that filled the night sky. Those old shepherds might have said, “We’re not going to get any sleep out here. Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.” And I guarantee you that when it was all said and done, those old shepherds would all agree, that night, that holy night, was the best night’s sleep they never had.