

4th Sunday after Epiphany, 2006

Text: Matthew 8:23-27

Trinity Lutheran, Worden, IL & Zion Lutheran, Carpenter, IL

Pastor H. R. Curtis

XGrace and Peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord
and Savior, Jesus Christ X

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy
Spirit. Amen.

What good is a sleeping God? For a sleeping God doesn't care – he's more interested in his own rest than in our troubles. That is what the disciples are saying to Jesus in today's text. When the waves crash in and the boat is almost washed under and things look grim they doubt their Lord and accuse him of not caring about them. They had seen him mercifully touch and heal a leper. They had seen him cure the centurion's son at long distance with a mere word. But now they have forgotten all that. It has been driven from their minds by their dire circumstances. The images of a merciful God in Christ who heals and gives life have been replaced by the immediately visible images of waves and blowing wind and lungs filled with water. They are fearful and bitter and angry when they compare these images to the image of Jesus sleeping soundly on a pillow. Why doesn't he care about us? What good is this slumbering Messiah? Why doesn't he wake up?

And is the story of the disciples not your story? Are their thoughts and questions not yours? Though you know how this Gospel lesson ends, though you know that the Lord Jesus is surpassingly merciful even laying down his life for you on the cross, still you have doubted your Lord and allowed the image of his cross to be replaced with the images of your own hardship. For it is easy to praise the Lord when the bills are paid. Thankfulness flows from our lips when the kids are healthy and the job is secure. But when these are taken away the sinful heart is revealed for what it is. It often isn't so much the Lord that his disciples trust in as the gifts the Lord has given. This is idolatry and no sinner is without his idols. Who among you has not accused the Lord of being unmerciful? Those accusing prayers always start like this, "Why Lord is this happening to me? Don't you care? Won't you act? Why, Lord, did you let this happen?"

The Lord's response to these questions can be seen in his response to the disciples today – and it isn't pretty. He says to them, "Why are you such cowards – or ye of little faith!" As the Lord was astonished by the faith of the centurion, so now he is astonished by the lack of faith in those who know him best. And none can escape this verdict of coward and one of little faith.

So repent. Stop calling God unmerciful and instead learn again of his love and pity for you. For look what Jesus does. He does not call his disciples – and all gathered here are his disciples - cowards and little-faithed-ones to be mean or snide – that is the way of men, not the way of God. He says this harsh thing to them to call them to repentance and be merciful once again. They accuse him of being unmerciful and his response is pure mercy. He calms their fears. He stills the storm. For the wind and the waves know what the disciples do not: His Word rules all things and changes reality. And the disciples are thus called to turn away from their accusations and toward faith – "For who is this man whom even the winds and the waves obey?" Who is this man? None other than God in human flesh.

Thus do the disciples learn that it is good to have a sleeping God. Now, as the Psalmist says, he who keeps Israel neither slumbers nor sleeps. For God Almighty is no weak human that must have rest as we do. That is good news – that God always watches over us even when we do not know it or acknowledge it. But that is not all of the good news - because God Almighty become incarnate in our Lord Jesus Christ can sleep. That is, he is fully human. He sleeps, he eats, he cries, he prays. He can do all the things humans can do and still he is the keeper of Israel who neither slumbers nor sleeps. Welcome to the mysterious reality of God in human flesh. He's in the flesh just so that he can do all the things humans do – including bleeding and dying. For a sacrifice is required for human sin, for there is no forgiveness without the shedding of blood. But no sinful man can give any price for his sin except his own eternal life. That is the price God requires. That is the fate of us all by birth. But God is merciful – more merciful than we dare to imagine. He became a human being that a human life, a perfect sinless human life united in one person with the Son of God, might be given up for all human sin. That is the meaning of the cross. Christ giving his life in your place. Christ being merciful to you. That's why it's good to have a sleeping God – because only a sleeping God can die and then rise again.

And still the sleeping God never slumbers nor sleeps. He is always caring for you and watching over you. Even when the waves rise high and the boat looks like it will sink. Even in the car accident and the cancer ward. Even in the empty house during the long lonely nights. Even in the unemployment line and the poorhouse. Still he is merciful. Still he watches over you, even when you think he sleeps. Even when you curse his name and accuse him of lacking mercy. Even then he loves you and shows you mercy.

So why do some boats make it to shore while others sink when the storms of November come early? Why do some patients find healing and others die? Is God awake for some and asleep for others? No – he who keeps his Israel, the Church, neither slumbers nor sleeps. But neither has he promised deliverance from every earthly hardship. Indeed, he has promised just the opposite. Jesus told his disciples that in this world you will have trouble. He said we would suffer and have to bear our own cross. For death is still loose in this land. Though saved from this storm, another came for all the disciples, in the Lord's good time, and they all died. Though this man or than woman may be saved from this bout of cancer, no one escapes the final enemy to be defeated – death itself.

For our hope is not in this world. Our Lord has promised us hardship here that we might cling all the more to him as our only hope for real life. Have you not seen in your own life than when the going is easy you are more easily tempted away from your Lord? Has he not used your crosses to draw you nearer to his cross? So let every hardship, every sickness, every threat remind you that your hope is not for this world. For if we hope in the Lord only for this world we are to be the most pitied of men. Our hope is greater. Our hope is for eternal life.

For you are already dead, Christian. You've already died a drowning more dire than that which the disciples dreaded. For you died in Baptism. As St. Paul says, "Do you not know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him in baptism into death that we might be raised with him to new life!" Your death in baptism is the real death, the Big Death which Jesus died. In that you died the death that you owed God, for you died Jesus' death which is the ultimate payment to God. Now this little death that still awaits each one of us has no hold over you. Now this little death, this last enemy, is a gateway to rest in Christ. It is still hard. It is still scary. It is still the

Christian's enemy. But Christ has defeated this enemy and he will return to put it down forever. He is returning to fulfill your Baptism and the forgiveness of sins in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting.

For you were also raised with Christ. Your eternal life has begun and continues to be nourished as you participate in that foretaste of heaven, the Lord's Supper. For here in the Supper of our Lord's body and blood we have the very life of Christ put in us. For this is no mere memorial meal – it is a life-giving miracle filling us with life and salvation and forgiveness. This is truly heaven on earth – for where Jesus is, there is heaven. And he is not far from you. He is not sleeping even though appearances may tell you otherwise. He is here, true God and true man, truly present in his body and blood for you for the forgiveness of your sins and the salvation of your soul. So fear not the waves Christian. Do not give in to fear. The Lord is merciful. The Lord is here. He is on your side and wants to give you the best gifts he has to give: himself. Come forward this day to receive him. Amen.

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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Now the peace of God which passes all understanding will keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

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