

# Sleeping in Church

sermon digest

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Acts 20:7-12

larry dipboye

On January 21, 2008, the Martin Luther King Day speaker at Convent Avenue Baptist Church in Harlem, NY was Marty King, son of Martin Luther, Jr. Former President Bill Clinton was on the podium. He was caught on camera dosing off, checking his watch, struggling to keep his eyes open, and, yes, going unconscious as he rested his cheek against his left fist. The next day *The New York Post* quipped that, like Martin, "Mr. Clinton had a dream." The article attempted to explain that in addition to being heavily involved in his wife's campaign for the presidency, Clinton was a heart bypass survivor. But he was also known to have a tendency to nap at inappropriate moments; he was caught napping in 2004 at the funeral of Ronald Reagan. The practice does not seem to have a partisan motive; however, it does seem to have something to do with church.

In the 1960's, astronauts were lauded for their ability to fall asleep at will. It was a condition of training and a necessity out in space where night and day were left behind on a rotating earth. But it seems that sleeping in church, despite the embarrassment to the former president, is neither an achievement of special training nor a distinctive gift of nature. In fact, most of us have been there and done that. In fact, just last April, Pope Benedict XVI was caught on camera dosing off during a Mass in Malta.

I was in my third semester of seminary. Although I had preached no more than a half-dozen sermons, I was invited by a friend to be the guest evangelist in revival services in a rural church in northeast Oklahoma. Every evening as I began to speak, I noticed on a back pew a rather large man who came to the service in his slightly soiled overalls. Before I could get past my introduction, he was fast asleep. With arms sprawled out (perhaps the sign of the cross); he laid his head back and for the balance of the sermon slept like a baby. I told myself that he had made the effort to attend the services in spite of his exhaustion. To add insult to injury, every evening at the end of the service he made a special effort to come by and give me a word of encouragement. He did tell the truth, always the same words of affirmation: "I enjoyed every minute!" And, I was sure that he had!

***Sleeping in Church is as old as the church.*** In the national journal *Christianity Today*, for several years Edmund Clowney wrote a humorous column "Eutychus and his Kin." For years I read his commentary on the modern church and wondered about Eutychus. The column never made a literary connection or revealed the identity of Eutychus. Clowney assumed that all biblically literate persons should know who this was without explanation. I knew I had seen the name but my assumptions were misguided. I thought that Eutychus was some obscure Greek philosopher. Then, I was reading Acts, and I found him. To my surprise, he was no hero. He was not even famous. Eutychus was the young man who fell asleep in church the night Paul preached in Troas. His name means "Lucky," which seems to have nothing at all to do with the story. With so many anonymous heroes in Acts, why was Eutychus named? Was Luke trying to make an example of the young man to warn other would-be sleepers that they would have their names recorded for posterity if they followed this example?

Luke's story in Acts is more humorous than profound. The story of the church had come to a plateau. Worship that once was limited to the synagogues and the Temple now came on the first day of the week in celebration of Easter. Paul was enjoying the celebrity of being the first missionary, and Troas was a nostalgia trip. Troas was where he first experienced the call to Macedonia. Troas was a safe place in a dangerous world. Troas was a respite, an interlude, before Paul's final battle with Rome. No one could really blame Eutychus for falling asleep. In addition to the long night of discussion by the elders and commentary by Paul, the dim light and the gassy air from the lamps and the stale night air were mesmerizing. The young man probably found a window to get fresh air, but the upper story room where the church met was three stories up. If you must sleep in church, be sure that you stay away from windows, and we might add, cameras. Your name might appear in the newspaper or be embedded in a Bible story. During the long sermon by Paul, Eutychus fell fast asleep in his third story window and tumbled to the ground. He was "picked up dead," but Paul intervened, "Do not be alarmed, for his life is in him." After the congregation settled down, the church broke bread. They may have shared a midnight snack, but they probably celebrated the Lord's Supper, the Eucharist, the thanksgiving. The crisis had passed. Paul continued his sermon that went

on until dawn. Eutychus was taken away alive, and the church was “not a little comforted.”

**Who is responsible?** This was probably not the first time and certainly not the last time someone has fallen asleep in church. We usually deal with such events by trying to pin the blame. We don't want a repeat performance. Was the sermon too long and tedious, or was Eutychus too immature and slothful?

For half a century I have been learning the art of preaching. An opportunity to hear Paul would fall second only to being on Matthew's mountainside to hear the teaching of Jesus. With that said, I am not sure that I could endure an all-night sermon no matter *who* the preacher or *how great* the message. One has to ask at what point does a sermon become a filibuster?

Irish Anglican priest Jonathan Swift (d. 1745), best known for his political parody *Gulliver's Travels*, left behind a sermon on Eutychus, “On Sleeping in Church.” Swift essentially ignored the details of the text and chose to address congregational complaints about boring sermons. He challenged the modern (18<sup>th</sup> century) expectation of being entertained in church. Swift might have been a bit defensive as he placed the responsibility for staying awake squarely on the shoulders of Eutychus and on grumbling congregations.

Perhaps the responsibility should be distributed somewhat equally between the pulpit and the pew. Every worship event deserves the best that we can give. Proclaiming the gospel of Christ deserves the very best the preacher can give in preparation and presentation, and it demands the very best we can offer to one another in the *koinonia*, the community of Christ.

A few years ago, retired medical missionary Sam Rankin approached me after a Sunday morning service. I was utterly flabbergasted by his excitement about the message he experienced in the service. It was not the message I had spoken. His experience had little to do with what I said. Something in the sermon triggered his meditation on thoughts remote from the sermon but totally relevant to his life and faith. I realized for the first time that the sermon is more than a pastoral speech or lesson of the day. The message happens when the Word is aroused in the mind of the worshiper. Somehow the message has a way of transcending both the pulpit and the pew to become an event of revelation and growth.

Amos warned Israel about “those who are at ease in Zion.” The people who possessed the land had lost the sense of daily crisis that had characterized the Israel of the Exodus. Luke may have been offering a similar warning about the church that drifts into satisfaction with the status quo. This sleep may be more apathetic than trusting, and the church may be in greater danger of death from falling asleep and falling out a window than from falling in battle with the forces of evil. The apocalyptic theme of the Bible is a wake up call to the church, a call to open our eyes to the new thing that God is doing in the world. Do not be caught off-guard. Every Christian is a sentinel with a responsibility to keep watch for the next chapter in the gospel message.

**A tragedy can also be an opportunity.** Luke's story in Acts is really an Easter message. It was the first record of the church's gathering “to break bread,” that is, to worship, on Sunday.

When the cross became prelude to the resurrection of Jesus, the People of God learned to take a second look at tragedy. Death in the church is devastating from every viewpoint, and most tragedies do not end like the story of Eutychus, where the victim goes home to live another day. Luke's understatement, “They were not a little comforted,” is not about Eutychus; it is about the effect of this crisis on the congregation. Whether Eutychus was dead or just unconscious is sometimes debated, but Luke's obvious intention is to affirm the continuing power of Easter in the church. Not many churches that I know would continue the meeting until dawn after a tragic accident, but every church I have ever served has had to live through crisis events, primarily the death of the saints. The life of faith, the life of the church, is one interruption after another. We have to commit to life after our present crisis just as the early church had to commit to life after the cross.

Every Sunday is Easter. We gather to celebrate the resurrection of the crucified one. In the face of the cross, we gather to proclaim in word and deed that the future does not rest on the survival of any one of us. We gather to find strength together to face the threat of death itself. To be comforted is to be anything but comfortable. The New Testament word for comfort is *paraklesis*, “to call beside.” Strength comes from *koinonia*, from presence. People who need comfort are not hungry for power,

authority, or wisdom so much as they are starved for fellowship. They need the presence of God in the fellowship of the saints.

Paul's time is short. He has only one evening to stay with his friends before departing never to meet again. If you were to interview the people, you might hear that Paul's sermons reflected the wisdom and depth of one trained by the best rabbis. The preaching that night probably contained substance, but nothing compared to the power of presence. Paul was called to stand beside the church. The comfort he gave he had learned from the "other Comforter," the Spirit of God who comes beside us in to embrace our lifeless selves and to lift us again to life in God's service.

The Sunday gathering of the church is about far more than hearing smart sermons. We are here to gather the power of the community of faith to stand before the powers of death.