

1 Epiphany 4 – Matthew 8

Jesus teaches us to stay awake. He also teaches us to sleep. Stay awake by paying attention to what he teaches. Watch out for those false teachings that would drag you away from trusting in the salvation revealed in the Scriptures and won for you by God's Son. Stay sober and beware of temptations and your own sinful passions that wage war against your soul. But also sleep in peace. It's all vain and pointless for you to fret with anxiety over what will happen to you in the future. Jesus has carried your weight of sin and guilt, and he has given you peace with your Father in heaven. He says, "Come to me all you who are laboring and carrying a heavy load, and I will give you rest." And when you face the end of your life, with death knocking at your door, Jesus teaches you to fall asleep in peace, confident that his promise of eternal life is true and certain.

Jesus teaches us to stay awake and watch out for the storms that gather around us. Be on your guard against the waves of false doctrine that crash against the church. But don't despair. Be at peace. Find your rest in Christ, because he is your peace.

When we don't pay attention to God's Word, then we don't find our rest in God's Word. When the storms and winds of this deceitful age come roaring against us, where do we turn for safety? Where do we find our rest? The world looks for rest and peace in its own thoughts and ideas. God calls us to repent of our own thoughts and ideas, plead guilty of our sins, and rest in his gospel of peace in Jesus Christ. Of course, our sinful flesh is incapable of this. In its desperate attempt to find peace and security, our old, sinful nature will always run to anything but the words of the living God.

Consider a couple examples from the Bible. After God called Jonah to preach repentance to the people of Ninevah, Jonah disobeyed. He jumped on a ship going the opposite direction. He wasn't at peace with God. Then a storm came and tossed the boat around in the sea. The others on board were terrified, but Jonah was fast asleep. And yet, Jonah wasn't sleeping because he was at peace. He was sleeping out of apathy. He had checked out, attempting to run away from the call of God.

When Jesus brought three of his disciples to the Garden of Gethsemane, they were weighed down with sorrow. They knew that their Lord was going to be taken away from them. They were so exhausted by their sadness that they couldn't keep their eyes open. They fell asleep. But again, they didn't have a peaceful sleep. They were simply worn out by their own despair.

Everyone knows the difference between a restful and a restless sleep. Of course, exercise, a healthy diet, fresh air, or a cool and quiet environment can help. But often the difference between a peaceful and a frantic sleep is whether you have peace of mind. Do you have a good conscience or a bad conscience. Do you have a sense of safety and security, or are you sad and afraid? Are you hopeful about what tomorrow will bring, or are you despairing and checking out of reality?

Despair means that you lose hope. You lose hope in God's goodness. Maybe you get discouraged by the work God has given you to do, seeing that it doesn't seem to bring about much fruit. Or maybe you try to make a good confession of the gospel. You teach your children and invite your friends to come to church with you. But you notice how few people seem to care. So many young people grow up and disappear. Their apathy for hearing and learning God's Word starts to rub off on you. You then begin to

2 Epiphany 4 – Matthew 8

doubt God's Word altogether. You may have times when you are so weighed down by your own sin and failures that you wonder whether Jesus truly took away your sins. Or you are so surrounded by an unbelieving culture that you find yourself wondering if these scoffers may be right. Is Jesus who he says he is? Is he truly the eternal Son of God? Does it matter after all? These are just a few ways that despair sets in. It literally drains you of any energy to pray to God or listen to his Word. Then you just check out, tired of thinking about it.

But don't let your anxious heart put you to sleep. Don't be surprised when the waves and storms of this sinful life crash against you. You're not alone. This is part of the life of the church in this world. We are a storm tossed little flock. The winds of false doctrine blow against Christ's church, deceiving even the most faithful Christians. It's discouraging. Not one of us here doesn't know a friend, a family member, or a loved one who has been swept away from the truth of the gospel by the waves of this evil world. The Psalms are always complaining about this. David says in Psalm 6, "I am worn out because of my groaning. All night I make my bed swim and drench my couch with tears. My eye wastes away because of grief; it grows old because of all my enemies."

Jesus gives us peace in the midst of the storm. In the middle of the chaos, the temptations, the doubts of our sinful flesh, the hostility of the sinful world, and the threats of the deceitful devil, Jesus is right here in the ship with us. And he is our rest. He is our peace with God. He is our silver lining, our light breaking through the clouds, and our assurance that our Father in heaven doesn't abandon us to the devil, the world, and our own sinful flesh. When we trust him so little, there he is in his Word. There he is in his body and blood. There he is having mercy on us and granting us his peace.

When the storm came upon the disciples in the sea, the water came crashing on top of the boat. The disciples were convinced they were about to drown. When they looked at Jesus, he was sleeping. Mark records the disciples asking Jesus, "Teacher, don't you care?" They saw their Lord sleeping. But Psalm 121 says that the Lord is our keeper and that he neither slumbers nor sleeps. How can he be sleeping? He must not care. He looks like the prophet Jonah who selfishly slept in the boat, worn out by his own apathy, as the people on board panicked.

But Jesus was not sleeping for his own sake. The Son of God never sleeps, not for himself. Yet, the Son of God became flesh to give us rest. As Psalm 127 says, "It is vain for you to go to bed late and rise early with anxious toil. Because God gives to his beloved sleep." The eternal Son of God, who neither slumbers nor sleeps, became flesh so that he would give rest to our mortal nature. After dying on the cross for the sins of the world, he rested in the tomb, sealing our rest. He sleeps in his human nature so that we, in our human nature, would have eternal rest with him, even in the midst of so much sin, temptation, and unrest.

All the while, he remains the almighty Lord of all, controlling the waves, the wind, and all things. He remains the loving Creator, always watchful and aware of our needs, even as he gives our frail human nature rest and peace.

3 Epiphany 4 – Matthew 8

Jesus got up and told his disciples not to be afraid. He also pointed out their weak faith. We need Jesus to do this with us. He keeps us honest about our lack of faith. This is why God makes us go through trials in this life. He doesn't want us to think we have a strong faith when we are in fact only trusting in our own reason and strength. There is no shame in admitting before Christ that your faith is weak. There is no shame in crying out to him for mercy. This, after all, is how faith is so strong. It's why faith saves us. It rests in him, in his Word, in his mercy and goodness to save us as he has promised. Jesus then commanded the wind and sea to stop. He rebuked the waves crashing against the boat. And they obeyed his voice. The sea became calm.

The disciples then ask, "Who is this that even the wind and the sea obey him?" Well, it's clear who he is. He is God, the only begotten Son of the Father. He is the Lord of all who keeps the earth, the sky, and the sea in his hands. Yet, he comes to us in such a meek and humble way. He sleeps in the midst of the boat to teach his disciples that he has come to bring them peace with God and rest from all their sorrows. This isn't the kind of sleep that just checks out and gives up. It isn't despair. No, it is true and refreshing rest, which strengthens our faith and gives us the hope to press on through this stormy life.

Dear friends, don't let the despair you feel in your flesh overwhelm you. Don't find your rest from the world's troubles by just giving up. God knows you get tired. This is why he came in the flesh in Jesus Christ his Son. He will not break a bruised reed or put out a dimly burning wick. He strengthens your faith, no matter how small. He will keep your going out and coming. He loves you. And as the Psalmist says, he gives to his beloved sleep. Let us pray:

In Jesus I find rest and peace--
The world is full of sorrow;
His wounds are my abiding-place;
Let the unknown tomorrow
Bring what it may,
There I can stay,
My faith finds all I need today,
I will not trouble borrow.

O Jesus, may I constant be,
Forever with Thee staying!
O may I feel love's mastery,
My ev'ry fear allaying!
The dove at last
Hath found sweet rest
From all her weary, futile quest,
Although she long went straying. Amen.