

We Continue in the Psalm series this week as we consider another “Song of Summer.” And I wish to acknowledge my indebtedness to Eugene Peterson for insights into this Psalm.

Psalm 127
To sleep, perchance to believe

I grew up with Alfred E. Neuman. This smiling gap-toothed innocent looking kid was on the cover of every Mad magazine, a popular satirical sometimes spicy publication. I convinced my parents it was a comic book. If Alfred and Mad are familiar to you, raise your hand. During the civil rights years, the cold war, Vietnam and the ups and downs of popular culture Neuman’s signature phrase on every cover was “What? Me Worry?” There was a lot to worry about then. There’s a lot to worry about today.

The Psalm we’re listening to this morning is tricky. It has unease and anxiety and worry in mind, the real, daily, homegrown varieties, large and small, sudden and lingering. And it gets to the point in a rather unusual way.

Not many Psalms start with the word “Unless.” This one does, and it has a “caught with your hands in the cookie jar” feel to it. It has the sense of a gentle reprimand, the “tsk, tsk, tsk,” the slight wave of the index finger in your direction from someone with a smile on her face and friendly encouragement on the heart.

And here’s where it gets tricky. Does this Psalm condemn worry, or make the believer feel that worry is somehow wrong? If we worry, is this an indication of a deficient faith or inferior belief? Hey, I worried about this sermon. Maybe later you’ll tell me I was right to worry about it. We’ll see.

At first glance Psalm 127 doesn’t seem to fit together. It feels disjointed, like a Psalm designed by a Congressional or synodical conference committee. The first two verses talk about builders, watchmen, and hard workers whose work seems to be a waste.

Then it goes on to talk about the large family which, in ancient times, gave a man a strong position and great security in his community. Sorry women, that’s the way it was. An ancient insurance policy of sorts. Instead of Allstate it was All My Children.

Now how can we make sense out of this seemingly unrelated cast of characters: builders, watchmen, hard-workers, and large families?

Taken in sequence, Psalm 127 explores the building of one’s house, the concern for security, and hard work. In doing so, this Psalmist raises a concern both ancient and current. He knew it as worry. We might call it anxiety. Whatever the label, we all know what he’s describing. We’ve experienced it. We may live with it in a variety of ways. In all the dreams, and duties, and delights of life, there exists the possibility that these things will bring worry and anxiety with them.

If I were to ask you to make a list of the major sources of worry and anxiety in your life, it’s very possible that the areas identified in Psalm 127 would be near the top of the list.

Building a house. Ask a person starting a career or a young couple starting out in marriage what they think about apartment life or mortgage rates. Talk to older singles or couples who consider moving out of a house because it's getting harder to maintain. Talk about insurance. Listen to members of a church or school raising funds for a building program, or a college struggling with financial sustainability.

“Unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labor in vain.”

Security today. What comes to mind when you read or hear about crime rates? What's it like as you leave your home or apartment for work or vacation or a quick shopping trip? How many smoke alarms and dead bolt locks do you have? If you have a security system, how often do you second guess it? When was the last time someone you know was robbed? How many people do you know who own handguns? Perhaps **you** do. How secure is our nation, and how many missiles are enough? Did you do any racial profiling on that last flight you took? Will you be able to attend a Fourth of July parade in the future without planning for your safety?

“Unless the Lord watches over the city, the watchmen stand guard in vain.”

Your job. Maybe you're not getting any younger at your job and you're wondering how long it will be before the company moves to replace you. Maybe you're next on the list to be laid-off during a recession, downsizing, rightsizing, reengineering or latest corporate euphemism for getting the proverbial boot. Perhaps the merger will go through, and you will no longer be needed. It could be that your work simply overwhelms you day by day by endless day and you wonder if you can make it or take it any longer. Maybe you're not certain about what to do with your life after high school or college.

“In vain you rise early and stay up late, toiling for food to eat---”

What do planning for the future, concerns for security, and hard work amount to? Are we left alone in all of these things? Does anyone see what we're dealing with each day? The answer of this Psalm seems very simple: These troublesome matters of life are either viewed from God's perspective or they may become a pointless, dead-end source of worry and anxiety. These things are either from and with and to the Lord or they bring unease.

Now that very simplicity may be the next thing to worry about if you're anything like me. You know how it goes:

“Lord, surely it can't be that simple. Please make it a bit more complicated, so I have to struggle to understand it. Can you work that out for me? I'm not sure I can take you at your word. You're the Lord of the Universe, I get that. But don't give me an answer that can fit on a bumper sticker. Life's more complicated than this. Right?”

Immediately, in the opening verses, we're presented with two alternatives, two possibilities, two attitudes toward God. We demonstrate dependence, or we demonstrate independence. This simple Psalm suggests that the life of dependence puts worry and anxiety in perspective. It doesn't minimize worry or dismiss anxiety. This Psalm shows us how significant it is that God

acts in our everyday lives, that there is someone who knows our worries and fears. This Psalm shows that faith casts all anxieties on God and leaves it to him to give us what he himself knows we need. He is not the puppet-master and we his marionettes. But we are not alone.

Let me ask a question. How did you sleep last night? Like a baby? Like a rock? Or did it feel as though you slept on rocks? How is it with your spirit when it comes to sleep?

It might surprise you to know that such things as sleep matter to God. In fact, it's the simple things of life which may reveal something of the health of our relationship with him and how we view life. Things like:

daily bread
speaking with integrity
uncomplicated prayers
unheralded stewardship

And of all things, sleep.

Have you ever thought, for example, about the significance of Jesus sleeping in the boat during a raging storm? The disciples must have wondered about Jesus' sanity. That gospel incident is a living parable, a record of Jesus saying the same sort of thing about his Father in Heaven that we find in this Psalm. Even sleep can be an indicator of who we think God is, a sign of how much power we believe he has, and a daily symbol of where we stand in our relationship with him. Just what does it take to remain calm during a storm of worry and anxiety?

That's why the line "for he grants sleep to those he loves" stands in the middle of this Psalm in more ways than one. It's there geographically, right smack in the center. And the whole Psalm centers on this brief observation about God's gift of sleep. When dependent on God, when we see that he rules and sense that he graciously gives all things, only then can we toss our worries in God's direction and sleep. We can sleep at night because we know that God doesn't. As Psalm 121 puts it, again very simply and directly:

"He who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep."

Habitual, debilitating worry and anxiety can be the by-products of lives with God an afterthought. left to ourselves in this worrisome world. That's why this Psalm suggests that we're wasting time building a house, making things secure, or working hard unless God is at the center of things. "Don't bother", the Psalm says, because our efforts without God in the picture may lead to sleepless worry-filled nights.

Now I know that there are some who experience sleepless nights because of genuine medical conditions, bad mattresses, or no mattresses at all. Some who are sleepless are under doctor's care, and not at all habitually worried or anxious, not at all the sort of people this Psalm has in mind. Yet the essence of Psalm 127 is expressed in these words: "for he grants sleep to those he loves".

The Psalm hangs together on these words because it shows us something of who this God is we serve. In this short sentence we see a sovereign God and we see a gracious God.

He is sovereign. It's up to him to grant sleep. He does so when we trust that he is at the center of things, when we learn that he alone rules.

He is gracious. He gives gifts-like sleep. God's love gift to his children who know him as the sovereign, gracious one is restfulness. This is the opposite of restlessness. It's the ability to rest in Him in all the dreams, duties, and delights of life. It's what our Mennonite sisters and brothers refer to as "centering", finding that place in our lives where we sense contentment because we belong to the Lord and we know that he cares for us.

It's not about yogurt or yoga, although both might reduce stress and make us calmer and healthier.

It's not about prescriptions or subscriptions, vacations or vocations.

It's about who rules and who gives.

Our Lord rules. Our Lord gives.

He stands at the center of things and knows what to give his children and when. Who are we to be restless, sleepless, worried and anxious as the habit of our lives?

This Psalm is gospel- it's good news for us. It's good news first for all workaholics.

Who is the workaholic? In the words of this Psalm, the one who rises early and stays up late toiling for food to eat. The one who sings to himself or herself, "I've got the whole world in my hands." Is there good news in this Psalm for workaholics too?

If our work is done with the attitude that we can rearrange the universe if we had enough time, if it's done anxiously as if all depended on us, if we feel indispensable to the task, the good news from Psalm 127 is that we're kidding ourselves. We haven't heard the word "Unless" or the words "in vain".

The good news for the workaholic is that God can stand at the center of things and our efforts at the edges and that life will go on. Soon in our work we notice how God works in love and justice, how he helps and heals, how he brings peace and freedom through those who lean on him. If we work as if all depended on us, then we soon worry that we aren't doing enough. This Psalm announces the good news of restfulness, not restlessness.

"For he grants sleep to those he loves".

Maybe you noticed that there is one effortless, pleasurable work that is praised in this Psalm: that of making children. Children in this Psalm serve as a reminder that God provides, and of how little we really control.

Now I know the special anguish of couples who wish to have children and are not able to. This Psalm is silent here. Like those who are sleepless for medical reasons, God's grace and sovereignty will be experienced differently by you. Many will testify to his love and care through even this.

Yet this Psalm gently reminds us that he is sovereign and gracious when it comes to children too, no matter how children come into the life of a family. The verses about children stand in contrast to the verses filled with anxious worries over building, security, and hard work. Children are a "heritage from the Lord". They are a "reward" from him. Now that sounds like gifts from a sovereign and gracious God. Remember that the next time you find shoe polish on the wall or gum in the carpet or a car with dents in the driveway.

Jesus himself would later repeat the message of this Psalm to his followers. Listen carefully to these words from Matthew chapter 6 from Eugene Peterson's The Message. As you do, picture your closet or closets, your garage, your desk at work or at home, or the possessions you claim. Picture your trucks, your toys, your ledgers, your accountants, your personal finances. Picture those by whom you are loved, and those who matter most to you in life.

Hear Psalm 127 and Matthew 6 shed light on our path: (read Matthew 6. 25-34).

"But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness and all these things will be given to you as well."

Does living in this confidence remove the threats of gun violence, threatening viruses, or growing climate change? Are we less uneasy about cancer, or heart disease? Do we unplug the smoke alerts, never lock the doors, and drop insurance policies? Never fret over crime or crashes, memory loss or mammograms?

Very unlikely, and probably not possible. This morning Scripture remind us of our limits and in all this points us to the Unlimited One who says to us today, once again: "Don't be afraid." That's not the same as singing "Don't worry, be happy." It's more like, "Don't worry, he's got you covered."

One more thing. Very often Scripture calls those who belong to God in Christ to act like Christ, love like Christ, and thus mitigate the worries of others. Those who worry about where to find their next meal. Those who worry about racial discrimination. Those who are anxious about caring for elderly loved ones. Those who are anxious about synodical decisions.

We have a calling here. We leave this place each week to love God and our neighbor, and in so doing we may ease another's worry and anxiety. Sometimes taking on the worries of others, perhaps longer, deeper worries than our own, puts our own anxieties in perspective and we become God's instruments of grace. And through us God grants sleep to those he loves.

Do you know who first sang this Psalm? More than likely it was sung by pilgrims hiking their way to Jerusalem to worship. For some of these pilgrims, hiking to Jerusalem was a nasty trip. Thieves and wild animals might be encountered along the way. For all it was dirty and dusty.

Can you imagine these pilgrims swapping stories about their adventures as they traveled together? Can you imagine the game of one-upmanship taking place as the stories got better and better, bragging and boasting while leaving God out of the picture:

“Hey Levi, my trip was harder than yours”.

“Ya, but Samuel, I’ve made this journey so many times-this is my 18th trip ya know der”.
(He was from the tribe of Minnesotans).

“Yes, yes Levi. But no doubt I’ve come from the greatest distance.”

And then amid all this bragging and one-upmanship, imagine someone striking up the tune of this Psalm over the noise of the crowd and singing: “unless the Lord”. (wag finger)

The Psalmist in this Psalm and Jesus in Matthew 6 describe a life in which the kingdom is front and center. Once God is in his proper place and we in ours everything else will fall into place. And we can rest in that comfort. **Rest** . . . in that comfort.

The proof of that, of course, is in Jesus Christ himself. He came to announce all may come to God and find rest. Cease from our labors to save ourselves. Rest from our labors to worry ourselves to death. Rest from our labors to act as though we are the center of the universe, around which everyone and everything revolves. This rest happens because Christ died on the cross to bring it. And he wants us to live that restful peace, and live as though it makes a day-to-day difference in our lives and for the lives around us.

As the familiar confession reminds us: “He has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood, and has set me free from the tyranny of the devil. He also watches over me in such a way that not a hair can fall from my head without the will of my Father in heaven: in fact, all things must work together for my salvation.”

So, this Psalm does not suggest that worry is somehow wrong, that our faith is weak because we are anxious and at times can’t sleep. Do sleepless nights mean deficient faith? Not if you listen carefully to this Psalm. God grants sleep. He doesn’t withhold it. Worry is a human condition as long as there are threats in our lives.

Look, Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane wrestled with the Father, sweat like drops of blood, Ironically, he found his disciples sound asleep. It’s not too much of a stretch to think he was anxious about what was ahead. But he trusted. Are we never to worry? I don’t think you’ll find that in this Psalm. What we do find is a reminder. When we do worry, when we are anxious, when we lose sleep, that there is something and Someone bigger than our worries at work in our lives.

May we sleep well because God never sleeps. He watches. He rules. He gives. It’s his nature. He doesn’t know how to act any other way. And he sent his Son to make that plain.

Unless the Lord! (wag finger)

Amen!