

Thursday Theology: “Sleep Tight!” A Homily for Evening Prayer

Co-missioners,

Sermons have long been featured in Thursday Theology. Even so, we try as a rule not to send you two of them in a row. Today this rule gets broken. For good reason, we think.

Chances are that our last two posts left some of you grieving for the state of the church. Written by Matt Metevelis, they addressed the closing of an ELCA congregation in downtown Las Vegas. [The second of them](#) featured the sermon Matt preached on the congregation’s final Sunday.

As it happens, the forty-five of us who gathered in St. Louis for a Crossings seminar at the end of January heard this grief addressed by the Rev. Ella Moehlman. Ella serves at Trinity Lutheran Church in Lisbon, North Dakota. This past fall she participated in a pilot project that matched younger pastors with Crossings veterans for three months of mentoring in the task of preaching. Three of these pastors, Ella among them, were asked to offer homilies at the seminar’s sessions of Evening and Morning Prayer. Ella spoke on the first evening. Her text was Isaiah 40:21-31, appointed as the First Reading for this past Fifth Sunday after Epiphany.

That Ella’s homily should overlap the issues raised by Matt was altogether unintentional. Still, it happened. It struck us that the promise she passed along to the people she was looking at that evening was one for all of us to hear. Hence today’s post.

A quick word about today's title, "Sleep Tight." We picked it. Ella didn't, though she left us no choice but to go with it, as you'll see when you get to the end. It may remind a few of you of "Sleep Soundly," a medieval book of sermons that Luther lampoons in the preface to his Large Catechism. The theme of our recent seminar was "Delivering God's Goods." One gathers from Luther's gibe that "Sleep Soundly" failed to do that. Not so "Sleep Tight." Here you'll catch yourself thanking God, as Ella urges, for the promise of the Gospel.

Peace and Joy,
The Crossings Community

"Sleep Tight!" A Homily for Evening Prayer

by the Rev. Ella Moehlman

Isaiah 40:21-31—

²¹ Have you not known? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth? ²² It is he who sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers; who stretches out the heavens like a curtain and spreads them like a tent to live in; ²³ who brings princes to naught and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing.

²⁴ Scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown, scarcely has

their stem taken root in the earth, when he blows upon them, and they wither, and the tempest carries them off like stubble.

²⁵ To whom then will you compare me, or who is my equal? says the Holy One. ²⁶ Lift up your eyes on high and see: Who created these? He who brings out their host and numbers them, calling them all by name; because he is great in strength, mighty in power, not one is missing.

²⁷ Why do you say, O Jacob, and speak, O Israel, 'My way is hidden from the Lord, and my right is disregarded by my God'?

²⁸ Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. ²⁹ He gives power to the faint and strengthens the powerless. ³⁰ Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted; ³¹ but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.

+ + +

[In the name of the Father, and of the + Son, of the Holy Spirit.]



So, on the topic of things that keep me up at night, we have the questions—

“Where does all our recycling go?” and “My God, how many plastic zip-lock baggies do we go through at my house?” and “The bird population is declining and so are all the insects and pollinators, and we are on the brink of environmental collapse! Why don’t people value nature anymore?”

And on our drive down here, my husband Louis and I listened to the Netflix documentary “The Social Dilemma,” in which former top execs from Google and Facebook and Insta are interviewed, saying how these seemingly harmless social media platforms are designed to hook you in so you watch and see more advertisements, and the algorithms they use to keep our attention are ripping apart the fabric of our society, as in “our politics are getting more and more polarized, “ and “democracy is in a decline” and “teen and preteen girls have doubled and tripled in their hospitalizations for self-harm.”

Other nights I’m kept up fretting over—

“How do I preach a word of good news to the parents at a funeral for their 43-year-old son, who happens to be their third son to die?” Or “How do I share God’s promises to a community who

doesn't come to church and listen to the good word that they so desperately need because they are in the throes of substance abuse and mental health crises?"

But the most sleepless nights are the ones after I've been up late with my husband, Louis, who is also a pastor, and we've been discussing the future of our ELCA church—

"No one on synod staff cares about Lutheran theology. They are so focused instead about the next new social justice issue, with no mind towards how it fits with our theology." Or, "How many churches are without pastors? What are we going to do?" Or, "Looking around at the pastors who are doing the work, well, there aren't many of them here at this conference and they sure could use a crash course in delivering God's Goods. We hear too much of this fake gospel from our colleagues, this 'here's how to live if you really love Jesus stuff' and it does nothing to comfort us."

And I'm sure, because you are here, you care deeply about sharing God's word with our world and some of these similar things keep you up at night, too.

It is so easy for us, so natural, to come to the conclusion that God is ignoring us.

My way is hidden from the Lord. The justice that I am working towards, it is being disregarded by my God!

- Why aren't you there alongside all of us in the fight to care for the earth?
- Why, God, aren't you there with me trying to keep together the fragile threads of family and neighborly care and community in our nation?
- Why are you not helping me keep your church alive?!?!?

Isn't this what you want, God? All these good and just things

that I am working for?

It seems we are just grass, one breath away from God withering us.

+ + +

But haven't you heard? Hasn't it been told you from the beginning? Over and over—are you not listening?

DON'T YOU HEAR YOURSELF PREACH?!?

GOOD NIGHT. SLEEP TIGHT.

THANKS BE TO GOD.

*Comfort, comfort my people. Your God is the
Everlasting One and God is not done with
this world yet.*



rom Canva

All these things, these cares and worries, important as they are, *do not rest on your shoulders!*

You *are* but grass that withers and flowers that fail because the breath of the Lord blows on you, because the Lord is the Everlasting God! Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary.

God has and does and will keep the world in order. While you

toss and turn on a sleepless night, God is keeping all the starry hosts in their places, and none are missing.

And on nights when you are sleeping soundly, smug in your own good works and self-righteousness, God in Jesus Christ is getting the worst night's sleep—no sleep at all! Nailed to the cross.

We are but little grasshoppers to the great and mighty God of the universe.

We cannot fully grasp the mystery of our faith: Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.

We can't fully fathom what that means, but nevertheless, that is what the Holy Spirit is whispering in our ear. That is what the church has been witnessing to throughout the ages.

God is with you. The weak get power, the weary get strength, and the dead receive resurrection life.

We are *here*, after all. To spend a couple days Delivering God's Goods to each other.

In Christ, God has a good thing for you. *You* get to proclaim that promise, to preach.

Comfort, comfort my people. Your God is the Everlasting One and he is not done with this world yet.

You get to rest at night, safe and secure in the broken yet whole arms of a Savior who has conquered death on your behalf and on behalf of the whole creation.

So what's a fight for democracy and social connection? What's an urgent appeal to care for the earth? What is a dying congregation? A dying denomination? Not insignificant by any

means, but as little as grasshoppers, compared to what God has accomplished and is doing for you and for our world in Christ. Death and impossibilities are God's specialties.

And as you struggle for these and other things, and you struggle for them *because* you have tasted and seen and heard the kingdom of God in Christ Jesus, the Lord is renewing your strength. He is giving you a new word to preach, a new hope for the future, and promises that you shall run and not be weary; you shall walk and not faint.

Good night. Sleep tight. Thanks be to God.

**Thursday Theology: that the benefits of Christ be put to
use**

A publication of the Crossings Community