

Message: "The Importance of Sleeping On It"

Scripture Lesson: Matthew 1:18-25

18 Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah^{*} took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. ²⁰But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.' ²²All this took place to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: ²³'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel', which means, 'God is with us.' ²⁴When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, ²⁵but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son;^{*} and he named him Jesus.

This past week I found myself afflicted by the condition known as LCPAS. Never heard of that condition? Perhaps you haven't but I can almost guarantee everyone here has been afflicted by LCPAS. LCPAS is short for "Lost Cell Phone Anxiety Syndrome," and, yes, I made that up - but you can relate, right? You know how it goes - I realized I needed to make a call and discovered my phone was not on my person. I had set my phone down somewhere in our home as I was going about a busy day. I usually put the phone on the charger, but not this time; all the usual suspects of kitchen counters and coffee tables and in between the couch cushions and underneath furniture turned up nothing. I checked pants pockets and shirt pockets to no avail, bathroom counters and bookshelves with the same result.

And that's when I really began to panic.

I began looking suspiciously at our dog, but thought "no" - he's a really good dog, he wouldn't take my phone without asking. With horror, I thought about the laundry and checked the load from the day before - the relief that it wasn't there did little to lift the growing anxiety I felt in my gut. Maybe it slipped out of my pocket in the garage when I took out the trash? Or it fell into the refrigerator when I went for my hourly snack break? Did our house have gremlins? Had aliens invaded and took it as a souvenir? Or worst of all - perhaps it was underneath that burdensome token of an overly-active mind - the feet-deep mountain of creative mess on my desk? That was a truly horrific thought.

But then, I finally did what always worked - and no, I did not have my wife call my phone, although that would have been smart (I always kind of thought of that as cheating!). I did what seems to always work when I'm at a complete loss for figuring out what is going on, where something is, what's happening next, or otherwise knowing how to move forward.

I paused. I stopped looking. I sat back, realizing my search was getting out of hand, at least inwardly with my rising anxiety and stress. I calmed my inner being and let things sit for a moment, taking everything in again but this time with the patience that comes with composure. I began retracing steps, thinking of other places and possibilities for where it could possibly have disappeared to. It was then that I realized what had happened, clear as a bell - God must have taken my phone!

No, God did not take my phone - in my reflective pause, I realized that the last time I used my phone was in my car.....and that's where it was. I had set it down while bringing things in from the car, completely forgetting that I had done so. High stress turned into a sigh of relief, all for the sake of a strategically essential pause.

This kind of experience is a very helpful way to consider what Joseph is going through as he faces a moment of high stress both personally and culturally. We find him facing a very disturbing bit of news - his fiancé is pregnant. This was taboo, prohibited, unacceptable, and worthy of capital punishment, let alone heartbraking and confusing personally. Joseph nevertheless reveals his character as conscientious and gracious as he seeks to silently release Mary from their engagement so that she would come to no harm herself. But as a considerate individual, his mind must have been reeling in several directions, feeling a sense of betrayal for having the covenant broken, a sense of mournfulness that the hope of a future family lay in ruins, and a sense of embarrassment for having to back out of a very public announcement.

But then - Joseph paused. He paused in the form of sleep, but I cannot imagine it was a sleep of great peace; the cost of being a person of conscience is that the mind and heart tend to work overtime, going over things again and again to strive for clarity and to be guarded against misstep, to make sure one is operating in a mode of high integrity and principle. No, I think Joseph's pause was an attentive pause, or maybe it would be more clearly understood as a restless sleep, one ripe for divine intervention - and so it was that an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to

take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.' ²²All this took place to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

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which means, 'God is with us.' The passage ends by saying "²⁴When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife."

Joseph paused. He slept on it. He slept on the disturbing picture unfolding before him in the culturally scandalous pregnancy of Mary. And God met his consternation with revelation. Joseph may not have understood anything more than that God was doing something remarkable here, but that was enough.

How many times, I wonder, have we missed the clarity of insight or understanding due to the lack of a timely pause in our lives? How many times have we insisted, when facing complicated situations and challenging events, that we were wise enough, strong enough, insightful enough, or capable enough to instantly respond with an effective solution? How many times did that instantaneous response end in regret? I know that I have had to learn the hard way to sit for awhile on the major questions that come into my life - and the more the questions matter, the more I need to sit in reflective posture and patient awareness. It is not passivity, but preparation; it is the kind of waiting that orients the inner self for a more worthy or more effective response.

Such internal pauses are built into the framework of faith; we call it prayer or meditation. Often, we may tend to miss the "pause" part of prayer, in that we have so much to share with God; but we also know that God has much to share with us. It is why we try to emphasize listening to as much or more than speaking with God; when we bring our requests to God, God may have already been speaking his graceful answers to our needs. Answers we cannot hear if we are insisting on a one-way conversation of us towards God. Pausing in prayer is not often thought of this way, but is it not the providing of a place in our hearts to receive what is on God's mind, what occupies God's heart? And is not the substance of that communicate always what we need most?

The Reverend Joseph Hensley is rector at St. George's Episcopal Church in Fredericksburg, Virginia; he relates a story that highlights the value of a pause. It involves the true-life story about a soldier in the Israelite army. One day this

soldier was on patrol in an area of occupied Palestine when he felt a rock strike him in the back. Before he had a chance to turn around, another rock had struck him in the shoulder, then another hit his helmet. He whirled around with his rifle ready to fire. In his sights he was shocked to see several Palestinian children, probably between 10 and 12 years old. They were picking up more stones to throw at him. The soldier did not want to fire, but he could not allow them to attack him again. He paused for just a second, caught between two unacceptable responses, and found an idea entering his head. He bent down and picked up three of the stones. The children stared at him with both hatred and fear in their eyes as they anticipated an escalation, but were left stunned with open mouths when they watched him.....begin to juggle the stones. He was good; he was very good; the soldier did a few tricks, and the children were so mesmerized they dropped their stones. After a few more tricks, they began to laugh. Then, the soldier did a grand finale, and the children applauded. He took a bow and walked away. Reverend Hensley had this commentary to share about that soldier: "No, he did not end the war with his action. But he took what had been hurled as weapons and transformed them into objects of wonder. He took a broken moment and made it whole with the laughter of children. That moment revealed God's shalom."

That moment revealed God's shalom. What a powerful thought! The moments that are given to us have the potential to reveal God's shalom, God's peace, God's presence, God's love. But moments must be taken; moments must be embraced; moments must be explored to see what of God is there. The pause of wonder, the lingering before the manger, the silence before the cross, the intermission of prayer, the suspension of judgements before all is known - these give us space to experience Immanuel. Sometimes it is not only helpful, but essential, to sleep on it!