

# A Sermon for the 24<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost - November 8, 2015

Church of the Epiphany, Richmond, Virginia

*by David H. Knight, Interim Rector*

*In the Name of God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.*

In the psalm we have just read this morning, the psalmist writes:

*Unless the Lord builds the house,*

*their labor is in vain who build it.*

*Unless the Lord watches over the city,*

*In vain the watchman keeps his vigil.*

*It is in vain that you rise so early*

*and go to bed so late;*

*vain, too, to eat the bread of (anxious)toil;*

*for he gives sleep to his beloved.*

This psalm has a prophetic message for us in our own day. If you and I stop and think about it—really think about it—we live in a time and in a culture that values achievement, hard work, and success. We live in a time and in a culture where it seems that our value as a person is determined by our production of work. We live in a culture when to be fully human and to have worth, we must be people who get results by what we do. We live in a time when sleepless nights can rob us of the strength we need to meet the coming day.

God's word, as we read in today's psalm, has something different to say about what it means to be fully human. Psalm 27 presents another perspective, one that speaks to our culture of achievement and self-reliance. Certainly, the way we conduct ourselves in our work

is important, yet does it really make a difference if we are always trying to squeeze more time out of our day by staying up later to get work done or bringing work home. How often do you and I find ourselves anxious as we wonder how we are going to get everything done that we think we have to do? How often do you and I find ourselves thinking that it all depends upon us. How often do we lose sight of the purpose of what we are actually doing?

This psalm today provides us with a wonderful opportunity to reflect on the movement of God's grace and presence and as well of God's provision of the strength we need to meet the demands of each day. It is a psalm that challenges a widely held notion that Christian living is essentially centered around solving problems rather than giving thanks for our blessings. Today's psalm comes as good news to us whose lives can often be gripped by anxiety, even fear. How often we think and are convinced that our very existence and our future are ultimately in our own hands. We find ourselves in that mindset whereby our work is all up to us and us alone. At such times, there can set in a paralysis. We wonder, has God abandoned us? Such despair fuels the conviction that we have been left simply on our own.

This psalm calls you and me to entrust ourselves and our journeys anew to the one who creates, who looks over us, and who provides especially when we are weary, when our existence seems uncertain, and when our resources are limited. This psalm is a reminder that God's ordinary and often seeming unspectacular provision is there before us for us only to discover. And where might we find that seemingly unspectacular provision? How often it comes to us as God works through others who meet us along the path in our journey, or through us as we become available to others in their journey. God's quiet provision also comes to us through prayer. One of the beauties of our Anglican tradition down through the generations has been the Book of Common Prayer which, while it has always provided the framework for our common worship and liturgy, has also provided a source of prayers for those personal times of devotion. In the Prayer Book, there is a wealth of prayers for us to use at different times in our journey, prayers that speak to the longings that may be in our hearts. One of my favorites is that prayer For Quiet Confidence. It's number 59 on page 832,

*O God of peace, who hast taught us that in returning and rest we shall be saved, in quietness and confidence shall be our strength: by the might of thy Spirit lift us, we pray thee, to thy presence, where we may be still and know that thou art God; through Jesus Christ our Lord.*

Then, lest we miss it, there is one verse in that psalm we have just read that comes as reassurance when we are overcome by our belief that it all depends upon us and we are overwhelmed. It is this verse in which we read,

*It is in vain that you rise so  
early and go to bed so late:  
vain, too, to eat the bread of  
toil, for he gives to his beloved sleep.*

“For the Lord gives to his beloved sleep.” How many times have you found it hard to go to sleep? You lie awake trying to solve problems of the day? I shall never forget the counsel I received many years ago now from a parishioner in my first parish. One evening as I was about to go home for the night I was feeling overwhelmed by things left undone and things to be done, one of which, I remember, was to find supply organists for our organist who took the summer off. I was sharing with this parishioner my sense of being overwhelmed. She gave me advice that has stayed with me ever since and it works pretty well much of the time—at least it does when I bring it to memory. This was a person who had a lot on her platter, enough to overwhelm any of us. She listened that night and then said to me, “David, when I go to bed at night, I say to God, “Lord, I ask for sleep tonight. Tomorrow at 8:30, I will once again pick up these burdens and carry them, but for tonight, I hand them over to you.” She described how she would actually go through the motion of handing over her burdens as if God was there to take hold of them, which indeed she began to discover, God was. I remember saying to her as we stood in the doorway of the church, “Does that really work?” She said, “You know, David, yes, it usually does work.” She seemed to have a grasp on the reality that our labor is not in vain if we stop and call upon the lord to be with us.

This past week I had the privilege of taking communion to Sarah Jenkins. She shared with me something that she read just recently that has been a source of strength and peace as she faces what lies ahead for her, much of which is unknown. With her permission I share what this has meant to her as she hopes it may be helpful to others. It is a piece from Forward Day by Day. It deals with the verse in Psalm 30, *“Weeping may spend the night, but joy comes in the morning.”*

*“Life coaches and therapists tell us that an entire emotional cycle takes ninety seconds to begin, peak, and dissipate. This is a reminder I’ve committed to memory for all the flavor and nourishment it has to offer. Knowing that all I have to do is hang on and not give in to the press of anxiety is a huge comfort.*

*On nights when I can’t sleep, when breathing for ninety seconds seems impossible, when I cry from exhaustion or anxiety or hurt, knowing that the morning is coming with a fresh set of opportunities to get things right makes me grateful. Understanding that the sun will come back up at pretty much the same time every day gives me such peace.*

*The first rays of sunshine, or the first and full breaths of a prayer, can bring us indescribable joy, relief, peace, and comfort. God is at work in our breath, to still our hearts and minds. And God is certainly at work in the world, painting an original masterpiece every morning, to give joy to God’s beloved. Thank you, Sarah.*

In this coming week, as you might be feeling overwhelmed with work, or with anxiety, or uncertainty, may you find peace and strength as you call upon the Lord who is with you along that path of your journey. And may you and I take time to give thanks for God’s presence that abides with us. *Amen.*