

# **“BABYSITTING THE WORLD”**

**Psalm 4; Luke 24:36b-48**

**Market Square Presbyterian Church in the City of  
Harrisburg, Pennsylvania**

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The late Gerhard Frost, a prominent Lutheran theologian and poet, featured in one of his poems an image that struck a chord so deep in me I've never forgotten it. He wrote,

*It was one of those nights when I was lying awake, babysitting the world.*

I am going to hazard a guess I am not the only one in this room who sometimes lies awake at night, babysitting the world. The cares of the night are legion: concerns about our children or our parents, worries about our finances, anxieties about our health, discontent with a relationship, discomfort about our work, dismay at the state of the world.

We have a warming planet and a catastrophically changing climate and how do we not wake up in a cold sweat about that? To this day I recall the sleep I lost as a child terrified by the Cuban missile crisis, fearing when I went to bed at night there may not be a world in the morning. Now we have Syria, Russia, Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, Palestine, Israel, and North Korea among many other places over which to agonize. Some of our high political leaders hardly inspire our confidence and keep us stewing way beyond our bedtimes.

I babysit the globe at night sometimes but the world I more often mind in the hauntings of the wee hours is a much smaller one – mine. I can take a comment someone makes and chew it over for hours. If twenty people are happy with something I've said or done and even one disapproves, it can seem in the night like all is lost and I am a failure. (Anyone know what I mean?) I can dredge up from my subconscious almost every malign statement ever made about me. I can conjure in the dark every injustice ever inflicted on me, every perceived slight or unfairness. I can feel my heart racing, the adrenaline shooting into my bloodstream, the forbidding gloom, the foreboding doom.

But most discomfiting of all are the sudden nighttime stabbings of my sins and shortcomings that call forth shame in me and shatter my illusions of being a better person than I am. Something there is about the night that incubates and exacerbates those feelings. Spiritual writer Henri Nouwen wrote in his book, The Return of the Prodigal Son that “*one of the greatest challenges of the spiritual life is to receive God’s forgiveness.*”

Like many biblical scholars who have commented on Psalm 4, I believed the psalmist was in dialog with external enemies as he, David, asks, “*How long will you tarnish my reputation? How long will you perpetuate your false assumptions about me and harbor your ill will?*”

But as this is a psalm of the night, we are probably in this psalm also privy to the internal thrashings of one doing some intense interior nocturnal “babysitting.” Psalm 4 is a soliloquy true to my own experience that ultimately helps me to “*lie down and sleep in peace.*” The value of knowing psalms like this one is that we can call on them when we are stricken in the night by fears and faults that keep us churned up and chastened.

David affirms his expectation that God will hear his call because God has been faithful in the past. What God has done, God will do. “*You gave me room when I was in distress.*” Another translation says, “*You brought me into a broad place.*” It is why, for me, the most helpful metaphor for salvation is spaciousness. When we are distressed in the night, mostly we feel trapped in a tight place or circumstance and cannot see a way out or a way through what is troubling us. But whenever in the past David has felt ensnared, embattled, or entombed, whether from within or without, God has delivered him into a bigger, more spacious reality. That which feels so damning or constraining is lightened or loosened and David can breathe again, can *lie down in safety.*

David does not have to accept the judgments lodged against him in the nighttime visitations that rouse him. He can confront his outer demons or inner issues head on, face them, let them have their say knowing they do not speak the last word about him even if there is some truth in what they present. Why? Because, David says, “*The Lord has set apart the faithful for himself. The Lord hears when I call.*” Not our devils, not our naysayers, not our own critical voices that rise up in the night, but the Lord, our faithful God, owns the last and definitive word about us. David knows the Lord’s word is a word of grace, a word of peace, that invites him to live into the Lord’s version of reality, what the scripture calls “the kingdom of God.”

So, David takes to heart this counsel from God: “*When you are disturbed, do not sin; ponder it on your bed, and be silent.*”

When you cannot sleep because dark thoughts about the way others have treated you or because of things you have done or left undone conspire to keep you awake, do not sin! The Spirit is blunt with David and with us at this point because the temptation to plot revenge or reprisal on others or to scourge or lash out mercilessly at ourselves is pretty strong in these times. Author Anne Lamott, writing on the occasion of her sixty-first birthday (about which she said, “I thought I was only forty-seven, but going over the paperwork, I see I was born in 1954,”) insists that Earth is “Forgiveness School.” Forgiveness is a lesson we are to learn in this life, Lamott says, forgiving others and forgiving ourselves. The nighttime wake-ups can be a classroom lesson in learning to do so.

David goes on to say, “*Offer right sacrifices, and put your trust in the Lord.*” The right sacrifices are not bargains or bribes with God. Not, “I will do this if you will do that.” In Psalm 51, like Psalm 4 a “David psalm,” he writes of another kind of sacrifice:

*For you, O God, have no delight in sacrifice;  
if I were to give you a burnt offering,  
you would not be pleased.  
The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit;  
a broken and contrite heart, O God,  
you will not despise (Psalm 51:16-17).*

In the midst of our middle-of-the-night wakings when we are angry, frightened, or ashamed, it may not be our first tendency to ponder quietly what is going on in us. But humility, contemplation, contrition, and trust are the means God uses to restore us, teach us, lead us into a wider place.

So, David prays for comfort and help. “*Oh, that we might see some good! Let the light of your face shine on us, O Lord!*”

David then realizes his prayer is answered: “*You, O God, have put gladness in my heart more than when grain and wine abound.*” Ultimately, the only antidotes to the agitations of the night are the presence and love of God in our lives. Everything else we think we need or want in our nighttime harrowings – vindication, restoration, assurance – yield to the better knowledge that we are held in God’s steadfast love no matter what, in every circumstance.

Thus could David finally say, “*I will both lie down and sleep in peace; for you alone, O Lord, make me lie down in safety.*” When we wake in the night with our anxieties and restlessness, what we want is peace. What I have learned over the years is there is no human way we can strive, strain, struggle, or otherwise attain peace by dint of our own effort. It is not something we

can produce or fabricate because self-made peace is circumstantial and lasts only as long as conditions are favorable. Deep and lasting peace is a *gift of God* to us and all we can do is to choose to receive it or not, to trust it or not.

The peace of God surpasses our understanding. We do not always comprehend it. But we can choose God's peace in any situation and any time, even in the night, because Christ always stands at the door of our heart offering it to us just as he stood with the disciples in our gospel story and said to them, "*Peace be with you.*" Did you hear in our scripture how the disciples were fearful and doubting and the risen Lord said, "*Peace be with you*"? It is why to me the most moving part of our worship each Sunday when we offer it in the Lord's name and with conviction and compassion is the "passing of the peace." "*May the peace of our risen Christ be with you.*" "*And also with you.*" When you wake in the night, recall that the gift of peace surrounds you.

To receive and to offer the peace of God in Christ's name to each other is the epitome, the apex, the zenith of our ministry to one another and the world. We do other things, too, of course, for scripture tells us to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly. But if we do not ourselves accept the gift of peace, we shall have no peace to share no matter what else we do because, finally, all peace is God's peace. And that is as true on our beds at night as in the light of day.

The thing about the psalms and why I invite you so often to read them and pray them is that they are not primarily informational. They are formational. Over time, they shape our lives, mold us, guide us, form us. They nurture us in peace. Then, whether we come into difficult times during the daylight hours or in the deep watches of the night, we shall not fall prey to what besieges us but will be raised up by the peace in which Christ beseeches us to live.

The peace of God is always present, even in the deepest night. It takes practice to receive, believe, and trust the peace of God because our doubts and fears are persistent. So, keep Psalm 4 beside your bed and read it and pray it in your anxious moments. As we choose more and more the peace Christ gives, we become for the world like the leaven in bread and the whole world rises with us, for we are Easter people.

Peace be with you, always.

Amen.