

The Greatest Stories Never Told:

Eutychus – The Man who Fell Asleep in Worship...and Died
Part one of a three part sermon series on lesser told stories of the Bible.

**A Sermon Preached by
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On the first day of the week, when we met to break bread, Paul was holding a discussion with them; since he intended to leave the next day, he continued speaking until midnight. There were many lamps in the room upstairs where we were meeting. A young man named Eutychus, who was sitting in the window, began to sink off into a deep sleep while Paul talked still longer. Overcome by sleep, he fell to the ground three floors below and was picked up dead. But Paul went down, and bending over him took him in his arms, and said, "Do not be alarmed, for his life is in him." Then Paul went upstairs, and after he had broken bread and eaten, he continued to converse with them until dawn; then he left. Meanwhile they had taken the boy away alive and were not a little comforted.

Acts 20:1-12 NRSV

Poor Eutychus. Have *you* ever fallen asleep in worship? It might have embarrassed you, but I bet it didn't *kill* you. In fact, if you've ever fallen asleep in worship, raise your hand. If your hand is not up, I have to assume that you are asleep right now. I am sure it happens to everyone at one point or another.

Have you ever watched someone drift off to sleep during a sermon? (And let's admit it, if people are going to fall asleep in worship it's almost always during the sermon, it's never during the offering or a hymn). I've got a great vantage point up here. It's really the best view in the sanctuary, if you're interested in watching people drift off. It's kind of fun, but it's humbling, too. Over the years I have found that I have the power to put people of all ages and backgrounds to sleep, everyone except my own children, and that's when they're supposed to be going to sleep. From here in the pulpit it looks like this when someone is drifting off: it starts with the heavy eyes, and then the head nod, and, finally, the slump. Unfortunately most of you sit too far away for me to tell if drooling or snoring follows. What's really fun is watching a sleeper get elbowed by their spouse. Then their eyes get real big and they are suddenly at full attention for a few moments at least.

A few years ago in our Inquirers group for new members someone asked why we didn't have more padding on the back of the pews. I told them, these are pews, not easy chairs. And if someone falls asleep in worship we want it to leave a mark. I can't remember if they went on to join or not. Apparently ours is not the only congregation where this happens. There's an old story of a Sunday school teacher who asked her little students, as they were on the way into the worship service, "And why is it necessary to be quiet in church?" One bright little girl replied, "Because people are sleeping." Even the Pope got caught nodding off in worship not too long ago; one of his assistants had to jiggle him awake. [see below]

I'm proud to say that I have never fallen asleep during one of *my own* sermons, but believe me I've nodded off through plenty of others' – even some of the greatest preachers in our country. And when it has happened, I've always felt like I had missed something, that I had wasted an opportunity for an encounter with God, that I had missed hearing God's voice. And indeed I had. If you've ever fallen asleep in worship, you've got to love Eutychus, and you've got to find hope in his story. But I'm asking you, begging you, don't fall asleep during this sermon – the Word of God is too important for that.

How does God speak to us today? How does the Father encourage us? How does Jesus teach? How does the Holy Spirit inspire? One way is through preaching. Presbyterians believe that preaching from the written Word of God (the Bible) -- preaching which points to the living Word of God (Jesus) -- is the *spoken* Word of God. [See note below] It's not the same as the way God spoke to Noah in God's Morgan Freeman voice – "Noah, build me an Ark..." But how many of us have ever heard God's voice like that? Very few, I bet. But many of us, I'll venture, have heard God speaking some way, somehow, through a sermon at one time or another.

Not every sermon feels or sounds like a life changer. David H.C. Read, the famed pastor of Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York City, hated this. He liked to say, "The worst sin in preaching is dullness." Nevertheless preachers commit this regularly. So not every sermon sounds like God's word. But every sermon can become God's Word when it is accompanied by the Holy Spirit and when we are open to hearing it.

Think of how we believe that ordinary bread and grape juice become Christ's Body and blood at this table. The same thing can happen with a preacher's words. They can be transformed, transubstantiated even, on the way from my mouth to your ears. And not every trip to the communion table leaves us feeling a whole lot different, does it? That doesn't mean that nothing's happening here. It can be the same way with preaching.

A churchgoer wrote a letter to the editor of a newspaper and complained that it made no sense to go to church every Sunday. "I've gone for 30 years now," he wrote, "and in that time I have heard something like 3,000 sermons. But for the life of me, I can't remember a single one of them. I'm wasting my time and the pastors are wasting theirs by giving sermons at all." This started a controversy in the "Letters to the Editor"

column which went on for weeks until someone wrote the clincher: "I've been married for 30 years now. In that time my wife has cooked almost 30,000 meals. But, for the life of me, I cannot recall the entire menu for a single one of those meals. But I do know this: They all nourished me and gave me the strength I needed to do my work. If my wife had not given me these meals, I would have slowly starved to death – I never learned to cook for myself. Likewise, if I had not gone to church for food, I would be spiritually dead today!"

Surely some sermons are like gourmet meals—not the ones I preach, but somebody's sermons somewhere. And some sermons are like comfort food—they aren't flashy but they feel real good. Some sermons are like appetizers – they leave us wanting more. But some sermons are like turkey on Thanksgiving Day – no matter how special they are, they make you want to take a nap. So what can you do when you start to feel your mind drifting off to your shopping list or your exam on Monday or, worse, off to dreamland?

Here are some ideas:

- **Pinch yourself. Hard.** Better yet, pinch the person in front of you. I guarantee you that once you do that, both you and that person will stay awake for the rest of worship.
- **If you're not a pincher, be a prayer.** Pray for the preacher. I once heard a quote, "If a congregation wants a better pastor, pray for the one it already has." Invite God to work in the preacher's life and in their speaking. Pray that we would be bold, faithful, energetic, and creative.
- **Get involved with sermon.** Disagree with it if you feel led to. Ask yourself, is that really true? Look up the scripture references for yourself. Take notes. Most of us wouldn't expect to get a whole lot out of a lecture if we didn't really try to follow what was being said and engage ourselves in what is happening. To a large extent parishioners get out of preaching – what *they* put into it. Yes, there's no excuse for a dull sermon – not when we're dealing with the life-changing, world-forming, destiny altering Word of God -- but parishioners have got to come to worship ready to hear, absorb, and be changed by that Word. The hearer's attitude is as important as the speaker's, when it comes to powerful preaching.
- **Lower your expectations.** God's Word can be life-changing, but it's not meant to be entertaining. Sometimes we are like the little boy who his grandmother dragged to prayer meeting every Wednesday night. He found it really boring. One night instead of going to prayer meeting with his grandma, he went to the circus. The next time he saw his grandma he said, "Grandma, you should go to the circus with me sometime. Cause once you've been to the circus you won't want to go to prayer meeting anymore." This isn't the circus, is it? There are more entertaining things that you could be doing on a Sunday morning – reading the paper, having brunch in your PJs,

sleeping in, but nothing else, *nothing else*, offers the same kind of life-changing hope as hearing God's Word.

- **And it's not the worst thing if your mind wanders**, if it's God who is leading you to quiet places of contemplation. When I listen to another pastor preach I can't always summarize the sermon or tell you where he or she was going, but I know where God was leading my thoughts: to places neither the preacher nor I intended – but exactly where God wanted me to go. I'm struck by times when someone will come up to me weeks or months after a sermon I preached and tell me how it helped so much that I said "such and such." I thank them; I don't tell them that I don't remember saying "such and such." And sometimes when I look up that old sermon "such and such" isn't even in there. If you ask me, that's *God* at work, inserting his Word in the spaces between my words. Let your mind wander, but keep nudging it back to God. God will sneak in somewhere.

We can't be too hard on Eutychus, can we? Even the disciples fell asleep in the garden. And it's not as if Eutychus wasn't doing his best. In those days worship was on Sunday *nights* because everyone had to work during the day; Sunday, the day of the resurrection, was the day *after* the Sabbath. So after a long day of work, likely in the hot sun, this young man – maybe about college age – decides that instead of playing video games all night he's going to go to church. In those days, worship almost always included a celebration of the Lord's Supper. And these celebrations included full meals – like our potlucks – with seconds and thirds if you wanted them.

So after a long day or work in the fields, and a big meal with his friends, Paul crowds him into a third story room with no air-conditioning and starts preaching, and keeps going, and going, and going. Paul is so passionate about what he's saying, and his message is so urgent – he's leaving town the next day – that he preaches 'til midnight and shows no sign of letting up. At some point Eutychus realizes that he has to do something to stay awake so he works his way over to what is probably the only window in the room -- which of course has no screen or glass -- and he sits in it. Have you ever tried to keep awake while driving – and rolled the window down hoping fresh air will help? And just like it does for us, for a little while, the fresh air keeps Eutychus awake for a while but then the next thing he knows he's taking a swan dive. Ouch! Do you know what the name Eutychus means? "Lucky." *Not*.

But maybe Eutychus was lucky or fortunate or blessed after all. At a very young age he knew what was really important in life – God's Word -- and he went out of his way to get it. He was part of a congregation of Christians who really cared for him—and for each other. He belonged to the church at Troas. He worshipped with them, ate with them, and studied the Bible with them: they were like family to him. So when Paul finally stopped preaching long enough to heal Eutychus, they were really happy for their friend and themselves. I can imagine each of those parishioners going home that day and saying, "Honey. You'll never guess what happened in church today. Paul was going on like he usually does, when all of a sudden this nice young man, Eutychus fell out the window.... You should have been there."

Why don't pastors preach about Eutychus? Maybe it's because preachers don't want to be reminded that sometimes we go on too long. But maybe it's the perfect story for all of us. It reminds us that really bad things happen to pretty good people, but people in a caring community have a much better survival rate. It reminds us that if we're ever feeling too tired for worship, go anyway. God's Word isn't meant to tickle our ears – it can wake the dead. It reminds us that even a deadly boring sermon can turn into a surprising story of hope, resurrection, and new life. Amen

Notes:

To learn more about Eutychus, check out:

<http://eutychusnerd.blogspot.com/2008/03/one-of-my-friends-asked-if-my-blog.html>

Here is the Pope having a Eutychus moment:



Pope Benedict XVI appeared to nod off during a Sunday mass in Malta, leaving Guido Marini (seated to his right) no other option but to poke the Pope. Perhaps that's in the job description for Marini, the Master of Pontifical Liturgical Celebrations.



In the PC (USA) Book of Confessions it says plainly, “when [Scripture] ... is now preached in the church by preachers lawfully called, we believe that the very Word of God is proclaimed.” [The Second Helvetic Confession] Wow!

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