

A sermon given on Sunday, December 6, 2009,  
at St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Cleveland Heights, Ohio  
by the Reverend Alan M. Gates, Rector

### ***Sleeping Sickness***

I've just read about a sleep-walking computer expert whose wife found him mowing the lawn stark naked at 2 a.m. Rebekah Armstrong was woken by a noise coming from outdoors. She found Ian mowing the lawn in the buff, but was afraid to wake him up because she'd always heard it can be dangerous to disturb someone who is sleepwalking. Fortunately, he was using an electric lawnmower, so she just unplugged the cord and let Ian go about his business. Later he came back to bed, and in the morning refused to believe Rebekah when she told him what he'd been up to.

I want to talk with you about sleepwalking. Or perhaps, more precisely, I want to talk about sleeping sickness. Doctor Albert Schweitzer, theologian, musician, and physician, once said this:

*You know the disease called 'sleeping sickness.' There also exists a sleeping sickness of the soul. Its most dangerous aspect is that one is unaware of its coming. That is why you have to be careful. As soon as you notice the slightest sign of indifference, the moment you become aware of the loss of a certain seriousness, of longing, of enthusiasm and zest, take it as a warning. Your soul suffers if you live superficially.*

Today I want you to come with me for an Advent check-up in the examining room of Dr. Schweitzer. I think we should have the good doctor check us over for symptoms of sleeping sickness. And what did he say were the symptoms? The doctor says, first, we should watch out for "the slightest sign of indifference."

This month the death tolls in Iraq and Afghanistan have risen again. Should I confess that, in spite of all the focus this week on Afghanistan, I rarely read beyond the headlines of the bombing accounts anymore? It is so overwhelming. This week the conference on global climate change gets underway. Geo-political environmentalism is so far beyond my ken that I don't follow it much, and I have only the vaguest sense of what will be discussed. This week gunmen killed five members of the international peacekeeping force in the Darfur region of the Sudan. Remember Darfur? I confess that tragedy has pretty much fallen off my radar screen; how about yours? This week the debate over health care reform moved forward in the Congress. Statistics were released on how much the proposed legislation would cost the average American who already has coverage. I wonder how many of us were more attentive to those cost numbers, than to the old-news, familiar (but staggering) statistics about how many people are altogether uninsured.

Doctor Schweitzer says that the first symptom of sleeping sickness is the slightest sign of indifference.

The second symptom: the doctor says, “the moment you become aware of the loss of longing, ... take it as a warning.”

It seems to me that our collective longing is not the same as it used to be. Correct me, if you will, but it seems that in decades and generations past, there was a fundamental optimism about the future. Many of us grew up convinced that each generation would have it a little better. Greater access to education, better housing, a higher standard of living, a more just society. Now, it seems, we're not so sure. Instead of more opportunities, we seem to face more obstacles.

The Judeo-Christian tradition told us to long for the future. Genesis told us that God looked at Creation and called it good. The gospels told us that God sent the Messiah to bridge the cosmic chasm between human and divine. From all this, we were convinced that God and the future were with us, benevolent, on our side. That assumption gave us motivation and creative energy. Now, it seems, we are not certain.

This week I read a commentator who suggests that our society's obsession with horror stories and films featuring demonically-possessed children betrays a fear that the future – as symbolized by the child – is essentially malignant. Can it be that we no longer yearn for the future, because we are no longer convinced of its ultimate goodness?

Doctor Schweitzer says that the second symptom of sleeping sickness is the loss of longing.

The third symptom: the doctor says that when you notice in yourself the loss of “enthusiasm and zest,” that too is a warning.

This week I watched some two dozen high school and middle school members of St. Paul's as they performed three plays for the Advent Dessert Theater. Each play had its own message: about compassion, about life and death, about where the Incarnation really happens. But the greatest message I get from our youth drama program each year is the Christian proclamation of love and joy made manifest in the love and joy with which our young people prepare and perform. Idealism, of course, is a characteristic of the young, as it must be, as it should be. But whenever I watch the enthusiasm and delight of young performers, I am brought near to weeping as I wonder what it is that replaces the idealism of youth as we get older.

I wonder for myself, I wonder for you: if youthful idealism must, per force, be transformed into something else as we age – then what, for me and for you, is that new thing? Is it pragmatism? Is it cynicism? Is it a mature hopefulness? Is it pessimism? Is it determined confidence? What is that new “grown up” thing? And can we be pragmatically optimistic with the same enthusiasm and zest with which we once were idealistic?

Doctor Schweitzer says that the third symptom of sleeping sickness is the loss of enthusiasm and zest.

So: how are you doing on the good doctor's chart? Signs of indifference? Diminished longing for the future? Loss of enthusiasm and zeal? Is it possible

that sleeping sickness threatens your soul? If so, then the word of Advent is for you. That word is “Wake Up!” And its primary spokesman is John the Baptist, that cranky figure who stands before us each year, shouting, “Repent!” and “Prepare the way of the Lord!”

John was certain that his people needed to be less indifferent. John was certain that they needed to look steadily forwards, not back. John was certain that they needed to act zealously according to their convictions. And, John was certain that if this challenge were met, then a future was in store which was full of hope, and creativity, and justice.

Of course, John never used such words as these. He spoke in his own language, that of his people’s scripture, and especially the poetic language of the prophet Isaiah. [Lk 3:4-6] In God’s future, quotes John, *Every valley shall be filled. The crooked shall be made straight. The rough ways shall be made smooth. And all flesh shall see the salvation of God.*

In John’s day, in our own day, our faith calls us past indifference and futility to affirm hope; to refuse to be either passive or cynical, even when those seem like a “reasonable” response, even when they may be the dominant attitude around us. The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has shown us that, even in life’s darkest hours, not cynicism or passivity, but hope and love are proven unconquerable.

John the Baptist preached good news. And where was that good news? It was in John’s answer to the question: what about the future? The future, said John, holds hope and light. So Look up! Wake up! No more sleepwalking. No more mowing in the buff. No more sleeping sickness of the soul. Wake up! Repent, change your way of living. Believe and act upon the Good News – that “all flesh shall see the salvation of God!”