

ACTS 20 — TOO LONG SERMON PROVES DEADLY

Anyone who has ever fallen asleep during a sermon which lasted too long can identify with Eutychus, the boy who nodded off while the apostle Paul droned on and on. In this case, napping during the homily almost killed him.

The story is told in the Christian scriptures at Acts 20:7-12. On the final leg of his last recorded mission venture Paul's ship put in at Troas.

He had made at least two brief stops at the same port on previous trips. But this time he was able to stay at least a week.

On the last night of his visit, a Sunday evening, Paul's friends in the vicinity rented a third-story hall where they could eat supper, observe their religious ceremonial meal, and enjoy an extended conversation with their mentor before he debarked on Monday morning.

The author of Acts implies that the air in the room must have gone stale because of the smoky torches which had been lit.

The combination of the vapid atmosphere, the late hour (it was after midnight) and Paul's long sermon must have been too much for one young man.

Eutychus apparently was sitting on a window sill for some fresh air. But that didn't do the trick. As the night wore on he started to dose and finally dropped off to sleep.

Then he fell out the window. By the time the others could chase down two flights of stairs and get to him, they were afraid he was dead.

The story has a happy ending, however. When Paul got downstairs he

fell on the boy and hugged him. "Stop making a fuss," he told the group. "His life is in him."

With that they went back upstairs and continued the meeting until morning. By the time Paul boarded his ship after breakfast, Eutychus was OK.

The exact significance of the story is not entirely clear. If Eutychus had actually been killed, then this is the story of a miraculous healing on the part of the apostle.

In that case, his actions of falling on the youth and embracing him would have been in the style of the ancient prophets Elijah and Elisha who did roughly the same thing when they restored dead children.

On the other hand, the story is told with so little fanfare, without mentioning any particular prayer for the boy or celebration of his revival, that the author of Acts may not have intended to give the impression that this was miraculous.

In any case, Eutychus' tumble and Paul's attempt at artificial respiration are the kind of details which give a ring of authenticity to the account of the apostle's preaching ministry.

In either event, it's a story you can identify with if you regularly attend church or synagogue services.

Sometimes homilies go too long and people fall asleep. When that happens it helps to know you're in good company. You'll probably survive the embarrassment of snoring during the sermon.