

## **“The Rest of God”**

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**Scriptures: Zech 9:9-12; Ps 20; Rom 7:21-8:6; Matthew 11:25-30**

Last week, Fr. Jack gave us all the fitting reminder that we need to embrace patterns of holy work and holy rest in our lives, unshackling our sense of identity from a sense of productivity, that our meaning and value as people are not derived primarily from what we accomplish.

Our Scriptures for today build out from that theme, centering on the invitation of Jesus to come to him, all of us who are weary, for his promise of rest.

Do you believe that you need the rest of God? I am not sure how that question will hit us. Maybe because we touched on this last week, you are primed and ready to seek godly rest. But just in case, here is some data to suggest we are sorely in need of true rest: Burnout is a reality among many professions. According to a 2021 study of over 1500 workers in various fields by the American Psychological Association, 26% of workers expressed lack of interest, motivation, or energy, 19% expressed lack of effort at work, 36% expressed cognitive weariness, 32% emotional

exhaustion, and 44% expressed physical fatigue, and this number jumped out from the others as it has risen from only 6% in 2019.<sup>1</sup>

And it is not just working adults who are suffering. Consider also the rise in depressive symptoms in teenagers. The rate of 8th, 10th, and 12th expressing the feelings of, "I can't do anything right," "My life isn't useful," and, "I do not enjoy life," has dramatically increased since the year 2012, rising to nearly 50% for all three of those statements today.<sup>2</sup> Whatever the causes may be, let's just acknowledge that it should not be that half of young people feel that they cannot enjoy their lives.

Something is clearly wrong. We are clearly weary. We clearly need the rest of God. And he offers it to us.

So what can we say about the rest of God? I think we must first say that it is offered to us in the midst of our brokenness: the brokenness we make for ourselves and the brokenness that comes from living in a broken world - that brokenness that is forced upon us. But God's rest comes in the midst of brokenness. We don't have to get everything right before we choose to rest in him. We don't have to be in a place of profound stability to accept his offer, for true stability only comes in him.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2022/01/special-burnout-stress>

<sup>2</sup> <https://fortune.com/well/2023/06/21/teen-mental-health-crisis-started-8-years-before-covid/>

It was no different for the disciples. Take a look at the rest of the chapter from which our Gospel reading comes, Matthew chapter 11, and I would like us to imagine walking along with Jesus as these things take place and these words are said. In short, it was a pretty bad day at the office.

First, you see in verse 2 that Jesus gets word from John the Baptist from prison, a reminder to Jesus' followers that the powers that be don't take too kindly to the way of their teacher. And worse yet, these messengers come with a message of desperation, even doubt from John. John, who was the firebrand in the wilderness, is starting to lose hope. The same one who told us all to "Behold the Lamb of God," is now asking "Are you really the Messiah?" If John can lose faith, are the rest of the disciples next? Jesus seems genuinely distressed over John's situation, and while he gives an encouraging word to John's disciples, you can hear the frustration in his voice when he bemoans how the people have not listened to John.

Then in verse 20, we see a similar frustration towards cities who have rejected Jesus' message, despite seeing his mighty works. And if you were one of the disciples, you probably wouldn't love this moment either, as it is a reminder of the rejection the world so often has for this Kingdom to which the disciples had dedicated their lives. It's also a reminder of their

own failure in a sort of way, as they are on the same mission with Jesus. It's safe to say the mood is low.

And that is where Jesus gives these words that have been a comfort to so many through the centuries in their own times of struggle and doubt.

“Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

If you are at a low point, you are at a place where you need to, you get to rest in God. This isn't the story we get typically in fiction - the stories we tell ourselves in novels and movies, the hero or heroine achieves rest in the last few pages, having conquered all that is evil and finally being able to rest. And while that sort of story hints at the eschatological rest of New Creation, we need the rest of God in the here and now, in the middle of our defeats and longings.

The second thing we need to learn is that the rest of God is not found in the idols of the world nor in the idols of our hearts. For all of the struggles we have today with burnout and anxiety, we sure talk a lot about rest and relaxation. Many things put themselves forward as our path to rejuvenation. Not surprisingly, they are often things that we have

to purchase, things that promise us they will relieve us of the stress of daily life. And this is not to say that things like vacations, playing a game together with friends, or enjoying a delicious meal don't bring good things, because these are good gifts that God has given to us. But there is a limit to what temporal things can offer us, and when we put temporal things in the place that belong to God alone, not only is that idolatry that turns our hearts inward, we are also depending on something that can't deliver on the rest we need.

Maybe you have experienced something like this before - you're tired, stressed out, or burned out. You just want to escape from the weight of everything you feel you have to carry. When I feel like this, the language I tend to use is, "I just want to crash." And what crashing looks like too often for me is collapsing on a couch, taking out a device, and entertaining myself into a state I think is rest.

It is almost cliché now to blame societal ills on smartphones and social media, and so I want to acknowledge that our idolatry problem existed well before these technologies came to be, but I do think they are a particular threat in our time. One of the reasons for this is that they claim to offer rest and rejuvenation, when anyone who has spent an hour on social media can tell you they did not leave less anxious or stressed out than when they started. Many of us know the feeling well.

In the data I shared earlier about young people and the drastic increase in depressive symptoms, you may recall that the researcher marked 2012 as the date when the rate started to really take off. The conclusion she draws is that 2012 marked the date of two things, widespread ownership of a smartphone and widespread use of social media.<sup>3</sup>

But it is not just our devices that we put too much of our trust in. Recall from our Psalm this morning, “Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the Lord our God. They collapse and fall, but we rise and stand upright.”<sup>4</sup>

Throughout the generations of the Church, and in God’s people before the Church, there has been a temptation to trust in earthly power instead of heavenly power. Perhaps if we were to rewrite the Psalm today, it would say that “some trust in tanks, and some trust in rifles, but we trust in the Lord our God.” If we think about the way that some look to civil politics for the hope that can only be found in God, we may say that, “Some trust in donkeys, and some trust in elephants, but we trust in the Lord our God.” False trust leads to destruction.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Psalm 20:7-8

And I think it is appropriate to link Jesus' words about true rest with the Psalm's vision of false trust because there is a link between rest and trust. You cannot rest if you do not trust. A baby sleeps in her mother's arms because she knows she is safe; she is in a state of complete trust.

Some of the places we choose to rest aren't worthy of our trust. In fact, those places keep us from actual rest. We have all been there. We need a break. We need to stop. We need to be reminded of our belovedness as children of God. And so we stop. But then there is silence. And we get uncomfortable with silence. When the working stops, that tends to be when the worry sets in. That's when the anxiety sets in. That's when those thoughts that keep us up in the middle of the night start to creep in. And if we are not careful, we will go to the idols we've crafted for ourselves, even if it is just to drown out those thoughts.

Observe this week what behavior, what pattern of thought you go to in moments of quiet, seeking solace? Try not to judge yourself, just take a moment to notice. If you find yourself running to the chariots and horses of the world, the smartphones and laptops of distraction, consider the boundaries that you need in order to redirect toward a rest that will actually renew you.

And that rest is the rest of God, in Jesus. Jesus says, "Come to me," he doesn't say, "Come to mindfulness," or "Come to inner peace." Seek first the Kingdom of God, and all these things will be added to you. The Christian claim about salvation is exclusive - Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. We might say the same about the Christian claim of what it means to rest. A Christian understanding of rest is centered in Jesus. He is the one in whom we find solace, rejuvenation, and the relief of our burdens. If we can be content in the silence, he will meet us there. He will take our worries if we offer them to him. He will take our anxieties if we offer them to him.

I'm somebody who processes my thoughts and feelings internally, and so that means that when I am dealing with negative things, it is often the case that those thoughts have been bouncing around in my head for a while. And the best question I could be asked when I am struggling internally is, "Have you brought this to the Lord?" It is surprising how often I still try to handle things on my own, to think my way out of my worries, to manage my way out of my anxieties. And yes, we need good strategies to maintain our mental health, and we thank God for the good gift of those tools and those professionals who help us work with those tools, but these are not a replacement for offering ourselves and all we carry to God.

There is a great cost to following Jesus, to lay down your life at his feet. But there is also much to gain, when we come to the maker of the universe and surrender our lives, with all of their struggle and triumph, all of our joy and pain.

I don't think you could get much lower than the feeling expressed by the Apostle Paul in our epistle reading for today. Do you remember the pure desperation of the question he asks? Confronted with the repeated temptation to sin and the constant war with the desires of the flesh, Paul asks: "Who will deliver me from this body of death?"<sup>5</sup> No matter what your specific struggle is this morning, I am sure you can relate to that feeling. Fortunately this question is not rhetorical, there is a specific and satisfying answer – the same Jesus who offers us rest is the one through whom we find our rescue.

What is it you still need to lay down this morning? What burden have you carried by yourself for far too long? He is ready.

There is a moment in *The Lord of the Rings* where Frodo, who has been tasked with carrying this heavy burden of a ring that can destroy the world, decides that he has brought too much death and destruction to his friends and that he has to take the rest of his journey by himself. In

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<sup>5</sup> Rom 7:24

the film version of the story, he gets in a boat and sets off on his own, unbeknownst to his whole crew, well almost his whole crew. Because his faithful friend Sam intervenes. When Frodo tells his friend that he is going forward alone, this is Sam's reply: "Of course you are, and I'm coming with you!"

This is the love of our Lord Jesus Christ, who says:

"Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."