

Finding Rest at the Mountain of Needs

Meta

Date: March 10, 2024; Lent 4B

Location: Apostles Anglican Church

Readings

II Chronicles 36:14–23

Psalms 122

Ephesians 2:1–10

John 6:1–15

Opening

The season of Lent begins on Ash Wednesday, we proceed to follow Jesus into the desert wilderness shortly thereafter, but when we reach the fourth Sunday of Lent, we follow Jesus' command, 'Have a seat on the grass.' Welcome to the Lenten Sunday known as Laetare Sunday, also known as Refreshment Sunday.

There are two Refreshment Sundays in the liturgical year. The other refreshment Sunday is the third Sunday of Advent known as Gaudete Sunday. Both occur in penitential seasons, just beyond halfway of their respective seasons. Both have Latin names which mean 'Rejoice!' Whereas we rejoice at the nearness of Christ's nativity on Gaudete Sunday, we rejoice on Refreshment Sunday in Lent that Christ's resurrection draws ever near.

But the focus of this Sunday is not only rejoicing in Jesus' future victory. We are commanded to rest, even in critical moments. In a season that calls you to repentance, fasting, prayer, caring for the poor, you are also summoned to rest. Yet the invitation to rest doesn't always fall on willing hearts.

I'm reminded of hearing a priest speak about fatherhood, both in the parish and the home. The priest was speaking about the gift of liturgy, the power of the psalms in liturgy, whereby young and old learn the psalms by heart. But memorizing the psalms worked against him one night when his young daughter was whining and overtired, resisting bedtime. He told her 'Go to bed!' To which his daughter answered with the words of Psalm 132

"I will not enter my house or get into my bed, I will not give sleep to my eyes or slumber to my eyelids, until I find a place for the LORD, a dwelling place for the Mighty One of Jacob."¹

¹ *Story told by Fr. Thomas Hopko. The Holy Bible: English Standard Version (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ps 132:3–5.*

From earliest days we resist the call to rest!

The Mountain of Needs

Jesus seeks a brief moment of rest upon a mountain with his disciples. St. John tells us that Jesus sat down with his disciples, yet he's seated with them at an odd moment. The conditions are not suitable for relaxation. A crowd pursuing Jesus has quickly multiplied because he's working wonders, healing people of all manner of sickness. We know from the story the crowd numbers 5,000 men plus women and children. From the bluff of that mountain, our Lord perceives the dilemma from this place, the crowd assembling will be hungry. They are hungry and yearning for more healing ministry. John does not identify this specific mountain other than its nearness to the Sea of Galilee, but I suggest we call it the Mountain of Needs.

The fact that our Lord is seated with his disciples on the Mountain of Needs is no small detail. He who was asleep and resting in the stern of the boat when a storm raged on the sea is the same Lord who remains calm when a sea of hungry people come to him for help.

When Christ lifts his eyes to see thousands thronging to him, he knows what he will do. And knowing what he will do he takes the opportunity to test Phillip. We don't know why Jesus chooses Phillip for this test. Yet Jesus tests Phillip with the question, 'Where are we to buy bread, so that these people may eat?' Now, if Jesus knows what he will do in this crisis situation, the mere phrasing of the question sounds like a misdirection. But herein was the test. Would Phillip look to the resources he could see, touch, count, and use, or would he trust Christ for help on the Mountain of Needs?

Faced with this crisis, Phillip has prepared a cost analysis that he presents to Jesus. Phillip speaks for the Apostolic Finance Committee and says that everyone will receive a 2 oz. serving of bread if they are wise with the 200 denarii. Phillip's hope is in his thrift.

Andrew, on the other hand, has the common touch. He has discovered a boy with five barley loaves and two fish. It sounds as if Andrew nearly didn't mention the boy's inventory. He sounds embarrassed when he says to Jesus, 'but what are they for so many?' It sounds like Andrew wants to say, 'Forget I even mentioned it.'

During the disciples' test, the 5,000 men plus women and children have come near. There is no more time. They are no longer in the distance, a sight from the bluffs. With the crowd surrounding the Lord Jesus and his disciples on the Mountain of Needs, what does Jesus say? 'Have the people sit down.' And St. John offers this interesting detail, 'And there was much grass in the place.' //

If you hear echoes from Psalm 23 in that detail, I believe it's an echo John intends.

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures.

I have received your best thinking, your cost analysis. I have heard that your highest expectation is a 1 oz. serving, substance that cannot fill the stomach of even a small child. You are on the Mountain of Needs and you have reached the end of yourselves. 'Have the people sit down.' Yes, your solutions are woefully inadequate for the dilemma at hand; yes, the crisis has reached its peak. Sit down. Rest at the feet of Jesus.

The Offering of a Child

With the masses seated in that place, Jesus takes the loaves. He does not refuse it. He uses the offering he's given, scant though it be. Don't overlook the meaning of that detail. Andrew may have discovered that meager offering in the crowd, but he didn't have faith that it could be useful. Yet the boy who possessed said loaves and fish offered them.

All they've got—the best they've got is what this boy offers. I love the contrast between Andrew's faith and this boy's faith. Andrew has no confidence in these stores to make a difference, but the boy offered what he had. I also find it painfully ironic that, on a later occasion, the disciples are the ones who will forbid the children to come to Jesus. They should have well remembered who gave bread to the Lord on the Mountain of Needs.

Barley loaves are grains harvested and baked by the poor. This boy has five loaves today, but his pantry was likely empty back home. Who knows how large his family may have been? Regardless, he is not ashamed to present this meager offering to Andrew. Andrew seems ashamed to present this offering to Jesus, but the boy simply offers what he has, insufficient, inadequate though it be.

Did not our Lord Jesus teach in another place, "Truly I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it"? Oh, one of the fears I have—it's a holy fear, I believe—is that as I grow older, I will lose the trust, the faith of a child. I wonder if what makes one old, what makes one *feltired* and old is the loss of simple trust.

I have looked into the eyes of 80 and 90 year old saints and I swear they had more life and energy than a host of teenagers. Though their bodies aged, their souls acquired rest through simple trust. I could see it on their face. Simplicity was the secret of their faith, the source of their rest. I wonder if the invitation to rest in Lent is more than just a place for pause; it is an invitation to recover the faith of a child, no matter how many years you have walked this planet.

Have a Seat While God Works

I have kept the drawings and the gifts my children have given me since they were little. I keep the gifts and drawings Apostles kids have given me through the years, as well. Never have I received a gift from a child who felt embarrassed or ashamed by their gift. Never did they fret that their gift was inadequate. Such is their purity of heart. Such is the beauty and strength of their trust.

And so the boy has given a pure offering, inadequate though it be at the Mountain of Needs. The *inadequacy* of his offering cannot negate the *purity* of his offering. He freely gives what he has to Jesus. Children are not ashamed of their offerings. They place them into the hands of their father with confidence the gift will be received.

And so Jesus receives the boy's offering. And he does so in the same moment he had everyone sit down and rest. Put your offering into his hands with simple trust and rest.

You and I have a mountain of needs in our souls that we cannot satisfy. We live in a city of needs, a nation of needs, a world of needs that exceed our strength. So bring the inadequate offerings in your hands and do not fret about the quantity; offer what you have with a pure heart, a trusting heart. And then sit down and rest.

We are given good and holy disciplines in Lent that will do good work in ourselves and, please God, in the world. But the truth is that they will not be enough. That doesn't mean we throw up our hands in resignation. No, it means we place our meager offerings into the hands of the One who receives all our efforts and yet will save us by his grace.

The fasting that you offer, which will most certainly not be sufficient to fully and finally reorder your heart, place it into his hands.

The confession that you make, even when you make a good confession, will not be a perfect confession. Place it in his hands anyway. He will take your contrite spirit and multiply grace upon grace on the offering that is your heart.

The offerings and alms you give to the poor will not eliminate poverty in this city we love. Place your alms into his hands anyway. He will multiply your offerings to bring an abundance of mercy greater than you can ask, think, or imagine.

I'll repeat again the spiritual counsel of St. Paisios the Athonite that I shared with you on Ash Wednesday: 'Go and do what you can and God will do for you what you cannot do for yourself!'

The Leftover Fragments of Grace

I am more and more convinced that rest is only possible when one believes that God is full of grace. When you have the faith and trust of a child; that your Father is full of grace, full of compassion, full of love, that is when your body, your mind, your soul, and your spirit will rest. Yes, there are other factors, to be sure; boundaries and limits and all of those things. But the greatest drain on the soul is that it's up to me to save myself on this Mountain of Needs. The greatest relief is placing my offering in his good hands, taking my rest, and witnessing the Lord work beyond what I can ask, think, or imagine.

There is not a little irony and humor in Jesus' instruction to his disciples that they gather up the remaining fragments after everyone was fed. Twelve baskets of leftover bread. And they had to hold the baskets. To look at the abundant provision, the abundant grace of God, he was teaching his disciples, I will use your offerings, scant though they be. But it will be the power of my grace that gives abundant, more than enough provision, for this Mountain of Needs.

I Am the Bread of Life

Now the end of this story concludes with a most disheartening outcome. Once the crowd is fed, when the baskets of leftovers are full, the crowd begins thinking about politics. They're ready to leave the Mountain of Needs and go to Mount Zion. The wonderworker, the healer, the one who feeds us, we will force him to be our king. They desire a Prophet, for the Prophet is the wonderworker.

Listen closely, saints of God, who read the Gospels during this election year. Listen closely in this season of Lent to the cravings within us. Once the craving of the stomach was satisfied, a new craving surfaced—power!! We want a Prophet who shows us his Power, who works wonders like Elijah. We want a powerful wonderworker to be king. You know, 5,000 men with renewed strength makes up a formidable army. And Jesus renounces their will to power. He will not feed that craving for power. He escapes this attempted coronation because Christ will only reveal his power when he is suspended from a Roman cross.

Oh, Lord save us again when you have saved us by your grace, from turning back again to the world. Deliver us from trusting in our own strength again after you show us so great a salvation by your grace.

It may seem a strange conclusion to Refreshment Sunday, to conclude with a word of caution. But so goes the story in St. John's Gospel, too. As it was with Israel in the wilderness after the Exodus in Egypt, as it was by the Sea of Galilee at the Mountain of Needs, so it will be with us. There is more than one test in this story. Phillip was tested at the beginning, but there's a test after the gift of abundant grace. Christ will give us the gift of his rest, the awesome wonder of his grace, but will we take the gift of renewed strength to serve our own agenda? Will the encounter with God's abundant grace and the blessing of his rest change our desires?

After they left the Mountain of Needs, Jesus said,

Truly, truly, I say to you, you are seeking me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you....I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst.²

Oh, Lord Jesus, let us desire you more than any gift you give, more than any need you satisfy, for there is no greater gift, no greater need than You Alone, O Lord. And when we desire You, like a child desires his father, then we are at rest in your grace. Feed us with Yourself and give us rest in your Presence forever, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

² *John 6.26-27, 35*