

## REST

Next to incurable busy-ness, the malady probably suffered by most Americans is terminal tired-ness, and no wonder. We get up extra early to beat the commuter gridlock. As the sun rises we creep along the Beltway in our hour-each-way crawl; we watch as the zombie-like multitudes, united in the ritual of the rolling back-up, apply their lipstick and mascara, shave their faces, talk on their cell phones and, God protect us all, text. Many of us work fifty to sixty hours a week; that is a slow week for some of you. These hours are spent on jobs that demand more and more for companies that are striving to do more with less.

After working that many hours outside of the home we face mounds of laundry, trips to the supermarket, balancing checkbooks, trips to the dentist, doctor, card store and hairdresser, and work on a Masters degree. Many of us tap our energy reserves to care for an elderly parent or for energetic wee ones who demand our attention after a long day at day care. And, as those infants turn into little kids, they have day planners that rival the activity level of a corporate CEO. There is soccer, piano, karate, the orthodontist, art class and more soccer. Teenagers I know are booked to the max. Finding a time to share lunch with my retired friends is even more of a challenge; they are booked for months into their seemingly ageless future. Occasionally some folks of all ages type “church” into their i phones, but that time slot is one hour. Period. That service, they think to themselves, better be over in an hour or there will be (excuse the expression) hell to pay. Surveys assure us that many folks take less and less time off work, and, that even when they do, that they are likely to be driven by a whirlwind, regimented schedule that maximizes their ROI at Disney World. Because

laptops and smart phones have erased the lines between work and leisure vacation is not what it used to be. It is not a time of rest. But now I believe many of us are tired in a different way. After almost two years of Covid, chaotic, corrupt political narratives on amphetamines, cataclysmic storms and so much more, we are deep down uber tired.

Think of all the times you have heard someone say: “I am tired.” As her husband walks through the door the young mother of toddler and infant collapses: “I am just exhausted. You take him.” The soldier in boot camp feels a physical tiredness unlike anything he has ever experienced. The college freshman who really studies for the first time, too sleepy to make a Starbuck’s run, falls asleep on his laptop. There’s the pro football lineman in sudden death overtime. The sixty-four year old factory worker. The couple who care for their severely disabled child, or the child who cares for her aging parents. The people who check you out at Shop Rite. The men and women who haul off your mounds of garbage, repair your roads, pick your strawberries. Day care providers. Nurses. Teachers. Interns. Firefighters. Construction workers. Mothers. Fathers. Grandmothers. Grandfathers. Sons. Daughters. Volunteers. And sometimes even pastors. Tired. Tired. Tired.

It is, therefore, not surprising that researchers have concluded that most Americans are sleep deprived. This is often a self-inflicted deprivation. Compare this to the bone-tired exhaustion experienced by the multitudes who, throughout history, worked themselves to death, who lived out the days of their lives in hard manual labor. Consider the exhaustion of the slaves who built pyramids and roads, who grew the crops and picked the cotton; of the soldiers who marched across continents; of the women who worked in ways beyond our collective imagination. But think not just of physical tiredness. Think of weariness, the weariness that comes from being

oppressed, beaten down, abused, the weariness that comes from a life without hope. That kind of emotional exhaustion leads to a whole new way of thinking about “I am so tired. I am just exhausted.” You have seen it; you have felt it. Beyond all of the ways that we can be physically tired there are all of the ways we can be emotionally tired. Listen to the words we use to describe it. I am tired of this bickering. I am so tired of the games you play. I am so tired of your lies. I am so tired of your drinking. I am sick and tired of feeling sick and tired. There are many ways that we need to rest. We are tired, tired, tired.

And beyond all of this there is a tiredness of which Jesus speaks. There is a tiredness in the soul, a lack of will to go on, a gnawing disbelief, a hopelessness, an anxiety, an uncertainty, a sense of dread, an unanswered longing, something inside that just cannot rest, cannot be at rest. The rest of which Jesus speaks is not offered to the falsely religious or the already comfortable, or the arrogant soul. It is offered to those who listen and respond and work. The kind of rest promised by Jesus is soul rest. That is a lovely phrase, isn't it? Soul rest. The kind of rest promised is soul rest. The kind of rest he offers is a renewal at the core of one's being; it is a quietness, a blessed assurance, a serenity, a peace. It is better than a deep sleep under a down comforter on a Sealy Posturepedic. It is better than sitting in an ugly Lazy-boy recliner drinking Coors and watching the Ravens on a Sunday afternoon. It is even better than an all expense paid week at a fancy spa. It is soul rest.

Jesus talks to those who will never enjoy the luxuries of mattresses or Lazy Boys or Day Spas. He talks to folks who live very hard lives in very mean times. He talks to those who are dominated by an empire so fierce that the terror of crucifixion hangs over them like black clouds before a killer

storm. For that reason, some scholars convincingly argue that there is a political connotation in his words in Matthew. Come away from the exhaustion of living in the empire; come to me. One scholar writes: “Rest cannot happen under imperial domination...but means the removal of that power.”<sup>1</sup>

That means that one can never really rest when one feels abused and dominated or controlled by tyranny without or within; you are never at rest if God is not God. There is always a desire, even when you sleep deeply, to get rid of the oppressor. There is always some degree of angst, anger, anxiety. God rests after the act of creation. God’s rest is possible when all of creation is in harmony. Men and women at war never really rest. No one sleeps while they battle rages.

Think of how you feel when you have had a horrible fight with someone you love. Think of how you feel when your head hits the pillow and you try to sleep and all you can do is replay the argument, the nasty words, the tears, the screams. Contrast that with the sleep you experience when you have reconciled with someone, when you have made up, when you have made things right. Or contrast that with the sleep you experience when you accept that you have done all that you can do, that there are some things that you cannot fix, that God is in control. Everything is ok; I can sleep now. The rest we seek is possible only with God’s presence, God’s intervention, God’s peace. Thus, the rest at the end of time will be like the rest on the seventh day of creation, when all was perfect and harmonious, when there is no oppressive and death-creating activity.

That is the context. Now, let’s look at Jesus’ words. When Jesus calls us, when he says come, he calls us away from the exhaustion of evil

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<sup>1</sup> Carter, *Matthew in the Margins*, 259.

empires, without and within, to the renewal and peace of God's creation. To grasp this, read the verses carefully. "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest." Come is a command, an imperative. It is not a call to dependence, to laziness, to retirement. It is a call away from what one is depending on that will never provide rest. Come to me. Leave where you are. Come to where I am. It doesn't say: run away or pull the pillow over your head. It says come from there, the place of perpetual tiredness and sleepless nights, to here, the place of rest. It says come to me. Come to relationship. It does not say come to this church, this book, this quick fix, this guru du jour. It says come to me. Christianity is a relationship to the person of Jesus. It is not a relationship with a program, a system, a denomination, a political party, a particular church, a cult of personality, a televangelist, a Christian radio talk show host, a Bible study leader. Christianity is a relationship to the person of Jesus.

Jesus says I offer an invitation to all of you who feel bone tired, exhausted to the core, spent, beaten down, fed-up, dominated, hopeless, weary and sick of trying, feared of livin' and scared of dyin'. Give up your connection to all that causes you to feel that way. Take off the chains, the ropes, the things that create all of your physical addictions, psychological dependencies and spiritual poverty. Then come to me to experience true rest. I will give you soul rest. I am not saying you do not have to work any more; I am saying that you have to follow me, learn from me, work with me. But in so doing, you will experience a rest within you. You will experience peace like a river, soul rest, God rest, blessed assurance. You will experience the rest of the seventh day of creation. You will understand real rest, worry-free rest, Sabbath rest. You will understand why rest is so important that it is a command. The rest I offer you is a hint of the perfect rest that will come at

the end of time, a time when there will be no hunger, no thirst, no strangers, no tears and no Sominex.

And what, finally, do we do once we experience this Jesus kind of rest? William Loader writes: “With such a sense of rest we can turn our attention to what really matters, **people**, and turn (away) from the busy hassles of religiosity with its industry of piety which continues to make many churches its factories.”<sup>2</sup> We can turn away from our need to spend millions personally and billions nationally so that we can feel protected from all the things that go bump in the global night. We can turn away from squandering our God-given energy on so much stupid stuff that doesn’t matter. We can turn away from the repetitive, destructive behavior patterns that always leave us older, sicker, poorer and more exhausted—and surely leave those close to us that way, too! We can stop exhausting ourselves by trying to manipulate and control everyone and everything, by trying to play God, trying to be God. We can turn away from all that we turn to for rest that eventually leaves us even more deprived and distraught. We can turn away from wandering from room to room at 3:00AM in a catatonic stupor and watching the Late Show for so long that it becomes the Early Show.

And, as we turn away from all of those things, we can turn to the God of creation who rested. Time to rest is part of God’s rhythm of creation. Our heart beats, and rests, and beats and rests. The sun rises and the sun sets. We inhale. We exhale. The tide comes in; the tide goes out. A time to rest is a part of the very fabric of creation. And on the seventh day God saw what God had made and God said: “Terrific. Awesome. Good.” And God rested. Rested. Sipped decaffeinated green tea. Read Emily Dickinson. Read nothing. Sat in a rocking chair. Stared at woodpeckers and lilac bushes and

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<sup>2</sup> [wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/mtPentecost7.htm](http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/mtPentecost7.htm)

cloud formations. And that very same God was so sure that that was the right thing to do that God made it not just a request, not just a suggestion, but a commandment. Remember to set apart that day, that time, that space.

“Remember the Sabbath Day.”

And by the way can anyone show me where it says: “And thou shalt cram as much into that seventh day as possible. Thou shalt shop, practice soccer, repair thy home and mow thy lawn. No. And even Jesus—even Jesus—who could have taught, healed, fed, consoled, and walked on water 24/7, even Jesus who had a perpetual, unfinished to-do list, rested. Rested. Found quiet places. Thought. Prayed. Meditated. Sat. Even Jesus.

We are made in the image of God. We are the body of Christ. We too, therefore, must rest. We can turn into horrible people if we do not rest. Listen to the still, small voice. Listen to yourself. Listen to your body. Listen to your own words. When you say things like: “I am exhausted” or “I am falling apart” or “I don’t have my act together” or “I cannot do one more thing” or “I just lost it today” or “I feel unglued” or “I am wiped out” that’s a pretty good hint. Slow down. Sit down. Rest.

Perhaps we are afraid to rest because we define ourselves only by what we do, and by who we are, when we are not at rest. Perhaps we do not rest because we are so vulnerable when we rest. Perhaps we are afraid if we stop we will not be able to start again. Perhaps we cannot rest because it means letting go and that frightens us. Perhaps we are afraid because everyone else is running so fast that, if we rest, we will be left behind.

The rest to which Jesus calls us is the same. It is a Sabbath rest. It is a holy rest. It is a rest that knows that, even though things are not ok, that they will be ok. It is a rest that comes when we know that we are healed, forgiven, accepted, loved, cared for. It is a rest that comes from believing

that God will raise you up on eagle's wings and hold you in the palm of His hand. It is a rest that cannot be intimidated by emperor or abuser or boss. And when we rise from that rest we rub our eyes and see clearly, we stretch our arms rehearsing to embrace, and we are ready, willing and oh, so able to go back to work, to share in God's daily acts of relationship healing, community building, people saving, kingdom creating and loving. Because after the Sabbath it is always the first day of creation all over again. Good morning.

Amen. Reverend Sharon Smith. The Gathering of Baltimore. September 5<sup>th</sup>, 2021