

The Gift of Rest

Mark 6:30 – 34

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30 The apostles then rendezvoused with Jesus and reported on all that they had done and taught. 31 Jesus said, "Come off by yourselves; let's take a break and get a little rest." For there was constant coming and going. They didn't even have time to eat. 32 So they got in the boat and went off to a remote place by themselves. 33 Someone saw them going and the word got around. From the surrounding towns people went out on foot, running, and got there ahead of them. 34 When Jesus arrived, he saw this huge crowd. At the sight of them, his heart broke - like sheep with no shepherd they were. He went right to work teaching them.

Mark 6:30-34 The Message

Our journey through this pandemic is certainly fluid and shifting. Marin County has one of the best vaccination rates in the country (over 90%) and yet there is now a concern about Delta Variant and those are not vaccinated – either because of health issues and chosen not to. So today we are back to masks indoors.

When we are doing our best, feeling hopeful and then something in our world shifts, how do we respond? It may depend what else is happening in our lives. There is always a mix, but I feel more poignancy. What are some of the words that reflect some of what we have experienced? And how might the Holy One invite us to experience hope?

In a *New York Times* article this past April, organizational psychologist Adam Grant identified the “dominant emotion of 2021” as “languishing.” He went on to describe this unfortunate state in a variety of ways: a sense of emptiness. Despondency. A lack of hope. Aimlessness and joylessness. The “dulling of delight” and the “dwindling of desire.” (1)

At around the same time, researchers noted that roughly sixty percent of Americans are experiencing pandemic-related insomnia right now, despite the gains we’ve made in vaccinating our population, lowering nationwide mortality rates, and resuming some measure of normal life. In other words, what began over a year ago as a natural flight-or-fight response to a global state of emergency morphed into something shapeless and threatening. Many people have lost a sense of balance and rhythm. As June 15, there has been more hope, more looking forward, more planning, more traveling. But there is still a sense of caution.

So I’m especially grateful for the lectionary this week, because it offers an important truth we will need as we navigate this next chapter of life. Our passage offers a way out of our culture’s obsession with soul-draining productivity and work & profit at any cost. Today’s passage offers us a portrait of Jesus we rarely consider. A Jesus who believes in *rest*.

When I read the Gospels, I often envision an efficient Jesus — full of purpose but short on time — striding from village to synagogue to hilltop to seaside, a whirlwind of miracles, parables, and life-changing conversations swirling around him. A sense of urgency. It makes me think of that song from the musical “Hamilton” about Alexander Hamilton

Why do you write like you're running out of time?

Write day and night like you're running out of time?

Non-stop!

A non-stop teacher is not who emerges in our Gospel reading this week. Instead, we find a Jesus who recognizes, honors, and tends to his own tiredness. We encounter a teacher who pulls his overheated disciples away from their labor and striving. We discover a teacher who probes below the surfaces of our busyness, and pinpoints the hunger our culture won't allow us to name: the hunger for space, reflection, solitude, nourishment, recreation, rest, and sleep.

Our Gospel reading is an odd one this week. Mark 6 is a disjointed cut-and-paste job that brackets Jesus's feeding of the five thousand and walking on water in a storm to focus on the seemingly less spectacular events that precede and follow it. Mark 6:30-34 describes the return of the disciples from their first ministry tour — their inauguration into apostleship. We see them on fire, bursting with thrilling stories of the healings, exorcisms, and effective invitations to people to follow this Jesus of Nazareth, Messiah, Savior. They've pulled it off on their own for the first time. They are wired. Excited. Caffeinated. *Ready*. In their minds, what they need is their next project from Jesus. Their next divine mission. In their minds, the crowds are waiting, and it's time to *go*.

But Jesus disagrees. Where the disciples see energy, Jesus sees overstimulation. Where the disciples see a tightly packed schedule, Jesus sees a poor sense of balance and rhythm. Where the disciples see invincibility, Jesus sees *need*. The need to debrief and reflect. The need to eat, pray, play, and sleep. The need to learn the art of solitude. (2)

Perhaps Jesus senses that the disciples have darker stories to share with him, too — stories that will take time and tenderness to unearth. Stories of failure and rejection. Stories of doubt. Stories of grief. Hard stories they need to process privately with their teacher. Whatever the case, Jesus recognizes that the disciples need a break. They're wired, tired, underfed, and in significant need of rest.

Jesus, meanwhile, is not in top form himself. He has just lost John the Baptist, his beloved cousin and prophet, the one who baptized him and spent a lifetime in the wilderness preparing his way. Worse, Jesus has lost him to murder, a terrifying reminder that God's beloved are not immune to violent, senseless deaths. Maybe Jesus's own end feels closer, and his own vocation seems more ominous. In other words, he has many reasons to feel heartbroken.

"Let's go off by ourselves to a quiet place and rest awhile," he says to his disciples as the crowds throng around them at the edge of the Sea of Galilee. "Come away with me," is how another translation puts it, and I hear both wisdom and love in these words. Jesus wants to provide a time of rest and recuperation for his friends. He wants to make sure that their passion for ministry doesn't become an idol. He wants to make sure that they value *being* more than *doing*.

One lesson for me is to pay more attention to the "throwaway" passages in the Gospels, those little transition verses which often precede or follow the "main events" of Jesus' life story. Passages like Luke 5:16: "But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed." Or Mark 11:12: "The next day as they were leaving Bethany, Jesus was hungry." Or Matthew 8:24: "Jesus was sleeping." Or Mark 7:24: "He didn't want anyone to know which house he was staying in."

In these "minor" verses, I see essential glimpses of Jesus's human life. His need to withdraw, his desire for solitary prayer, his physical hunger, his sleepiness, his inclination to hide. These glimpses take nothing away from Jesus's divinity; they enhance it, making it richer and all the more mysterious. They remind me that the Incarnation truly is one of Christianity's gifts to the human family. God — Divine Mystery — Divine Love Enfleshed — hungers, sleeps, eats, rests, withdraws, and grieves and rests.

Of course, this lesson isn't new; it runs through Scripture from its earliest pages. In Genesis, God rests on the seventh day, and calls the Sabbath holy for all future generations. Honoring this is no small feat in our 21st century lives, where every hour of every day is measured in profits gained or advantages lost.

To remember that God rests, that Jesus rests, is important.

We have had over a year of maybe forced resting. And for many of you who are retired there is a different rhythm that maybe has felt more restful than your work life. However, I think we can still be busy and even too busy whatever stage of life we may be in.

As each of us discover some new rhythms in a world where vaccinations make living and connecting with people we love and being active in our community possible, let's keep asking ourselves

- + how and when we rest,
- + how and when we renew our spirits,
- + how do we as a church find a richness in our life together and working on social justice, and yet also rest, also savor the beauty of worship, encourage each other in Sabbath time & practices, enter into contemplative prayer.

One of my practices is to commit to Sabbath time each week. My Sabbath is Friday. Every Friday as much as possible Jeffrey and I choose a different rhythm. Exercise, take a nap, read, and maybe do something special together. Last Friday we went to Van Gogh Immersive experience. Wow.... There was something sacred about it. Taking in beauty – paintings and music – with other people. No talking. Breadth of his work and human experience – dark and shadowy potato eaters, rich purple irises, eye popping yellow fields. It was renewing for me, resting in that moment of beauty.

Rest. Rest physically, emotionally, spiritually. Rest from news cycles, rest from burdens and worries. So that we can continue to move into a new season. Flourishing. To honor the rhythms and borders of work and play, inside and outside, online and in-person, sleep and wakefulness. Jesus asks his disciples to leave the noise and crowds behind. Sometimes, we need deep silence. Experience that deeper connection to the Divine Love. This is flourishing.

So hear the message of Sabbath:

You are free and loved just for being you, and for no other reason.

Wholly apart from all you produce or consume, you are God's precious child, creation.

This is who you are.

Made of from the source of Love, Holy One, the Creator, sustainer, enjoyer of life.

This is whose you are.

So I want to invite you to accept the gift of Sabbath.

Let God reconnect you with others and celebrate who God made you to be.

Let God reconnect you with your creator and celebrate God's world.

Close your eyes and look deep in your soul and ask yourself,
What would give me joy right now? What does my soul need?
And then let God meet you at that place. Because God will.

I do not know what restores you, where you take your rest, how you find the sustenance that enables you to meet those who wait for you with their insistent hungers. But whatever it is, whatever soothes you and brings you solace, may you find it in the rhythm of this day, as close as the beating of your heart, as quiet as the space between the beats. Amen.

1) Adam Grant, "There's a Name for the Blah You're Feeling: It's Called Languishing," NYT, 4/19/21
<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/19/well/mind/covid-mental-health-languishing.html>

2) Debi Thomas, "The Gift of Rest," Journey with Jesus, posted 11 July 2021
<https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay>