

Wandering Sheep, Are You Willing to Be Led?

Jeremiah 23:1-6, Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

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Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

³⁰The apostles gathered around Jesus and reported to him all they had done and taught. ³¹Then, because so many people were coming and going that they did not even have a chance to eat, he said to them, "Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest."

³²So they went away by themselves in a boat to a solitary place. ³³But many who saw them leaving recognized them and ran on foot from all the towns and got there ahead of them. ³⁴When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So he began teaching them many things.

⁵³When they had crossed over, they landed at Gennesaret and anchored there. ⁵⁴As soon as they got out of the boat, people recognized Jesus. ⁵⁵They ran throughout that whole region and carried the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was. ⁵⁶And wherever he went—into villages, towns or countryside—they placed the sick in the marketplaces. They begged him to let them touch even the edge of his cloak, and all who touched him were healed.

Proclamation of the Word

Would you agree that many folks in our day and time are consistently
Weary

Exhausted

Sleep deprived?

The Centers for Disease Control reports that 30% of American get less than 6 hours of sleep a night. Some survive off of energy drinks full of vitamins and caffeine. One article from the Weather Channel's website on climate and health suggests that we are a nation of zombies and that it is taking its toll.

The writer asks the question:

"But how did we become a nation of bleary-eyed sleepwalkers, swigging giant lattes to make it through the morning? Experts blame a culture of overstimulation: As Americans become increasingly addicted to technology, most people are up late into the night texting friends on cell phones, flipping TV channels or surfing the Internet."¹

Some of us remember a time when the flag was raised and the TV programming went off at midnight. Consider the wonderful gift of the internet, 24 hour cable news, and mobile phones which give us any time access to the web, our email, and contacts. Yet many of us are in overdrive and overload. We are drowning in a sea of information but thirsty for understanding.

PAUSE

In our recent move, we decided not to have the cable to our TV connected. It has been a wonderful way to “unplug” from one form of stimulation. We now schedule time to watch DVDs instead. It has been a welcome reprieve for our family.

Beyond technology, weariness is related to work issues:

Back to the same article, “Americans also are working much longer hours and commuting farther than they did in decades past. Dr. Kryger, chair of the National Sleep Foundation, said many of his patients spend hours every week driving to work, chunks of blank time that should be used for sleeping or ‘generally living life.’ Increasing portions of the population are working nontraditional hours — as medical professionals, long-haul truckers, even cashiers at 24-hour superstores — further threatening a good night's sleep. The earliest risers aren't necessarily shift workers, either: They're students. As schools move start times to as early as 7 a.m. to accommodate after-school sports and busing schedules, habitually tired teenagers are joining the ranks of baggy-eyed adults by compensating for lack of sleep with Starbucks and energy drinks. (I witnessed this particularly in a large urban area like Atlanta where students were waiting under light posts well before sunrise to catch their buses.)

But the nation's chronic lack of sleep has more serious implications than a nationwide caffeine addiction. Insufficient sleep is associated with a number of diseases and conditions, such as diabetes, obesity, and depression.”¹

Perhaps our 24/7 world has become one of our greatest health risks. Our gospel lesson today then is good news for weary ones in need of healing and rest.

Ed Loring, a Presbyterian Minister, who along with others began The Open Door Community, a place of hospitality for Atlanta's homeless, was commenting on this 24/7 world in which we live. Ed is a wild-eyed John the Baptist type for whom confrontation is common. Ed would take to preaching any chance he could. He made a comment to me one early morning before sunrise as we left to serve breakfast to our homeless neighbors. As we left we saw that work had continued all night next to the Open Door on a fancy new Blockbuster Video Store. He said one of the worst things to happen to humankind was the invention of the light bulb. Ed was prone to rants, so I just listened wondering where he was going with that argument. He said the light bulb made it possible for humans to work 24/7, to think they were in charge of the world, and never to rest. I have thought about that moment many times, and I am convinced that Ed, the prophet, was speaking the truth. Prophets call us to mindfulness of things we do not see or realize.

It is true, we live in an anytime, anyplace, anywhere world.

Where our culture does not support having boundaries, we have to create them. In God's good Creation a rhythm of work and rest was built in. God set a pattern for us in Creation- 6 days of work and 1 day of rest.

This is where Jesus steps in today. He is the Lord of Creation- Jesus comes into the picture to show us that he is a healer. He is the good Shepherd who has compassion on the throng of people who have chased him down. He leads his own disciples who have just been on the biggest mission trip of their lives having been sent out to take the message of Jesus to all those they met. He shepherds the disciples as well. The disciples come home so excited and bursting with stories of their travels like when our youth return from a life-changing and meaningful mission trip. The disciples have had little time for eating, let alone rest.

SCRIPTURE (from the NIV)

Jesus speaks these words to them,

“Come with me

By yourselves

To a quiet place

And get some rest.”

Coming away with Jesus is not getting away for pure pleasure.

Coming with Jesus is spending time with him as Shepherd.

Doing the things that Jesus would do- pray, reflect, listen, BE.

Jesus is the Source of our refreshment. We are people made in God's image, and God rested one out of 7 days. We toil for 6 days and then rest in God's grace on the 7th.

SABBATH

A resurgence of interest in the biblical concept of Sabbath is apparent in the number of books written on this subject. It seems that something is missing that used to be built in to our society and culture. But Sabbath is not about leisure and down time alone. It is a practice of faith. For Jews the Sabbath begins on Friday night at sundown and ends on Saturday at sundown. Lauren Winner, author of many books, who practiced Judaism growing up before converting to Christianity, says that her Christian Sabbath does not seem as holy as her Jewish Sabbaths growing up. A Jewish Sabbath begins with a meal at home which has a liturgy of prayers surrounding the meal. Sabbath begins with worship at home. She remembers that her Sabbath was truly a rest from worry and a time of renewal. The family went to synagogue together on Saturday. They did not work, which for students meant no homework.

Can I get an Amen from our students present?

Lauren says they did things that helped them celebrate- sleep, time spent enjoying relationships, reflecting, playing, in other words, doing “good for nothing”

things. In this day of rest and reverence we remember who we are and whose we are.

Puritans had a saying, "Good Sabbaths make good Christians." And then they instituted things such as Sabbath laws which existed in the South until recent times. Perhaps the last vestige of sabbatarianism and blue laws is the no alcohol sold on Sunday debate that exists in many towns and counties now. Sabbath laws seem to have faded away. Perhaps they have gone the way of American attitude of nobody can tell me what I can do. Plus, a seventh day of commerce gives Americans an additional day to make and spend money which tends to overrule practices of faith. Perhaps our Puritan ancestors were overruled by that Protestant work ethic that so strongly also influences our society. Practicing Sabbath is truly counter-cultural.

Jesus, being a good Jew, understood the need for Sabbath rest- rest not tied necessarily to a day of the week. He told those weary, but excited disciples to

Come with me
By yourselves
To a quiet place
And get some rest.

Jesus knew that the good mission work they had been a part of was due to God working through them. They needed to reconnect again with the source of their life, motivation, and strength. He told them to spend some time with him, to be quiet, and to rest.

Jesus followed the 4th Commandment to remember the Sabbath and to keep it holy. But he came to redefine its meaning. In Creation, God rested on the 7th day, Saturday, so his followers did the same. After the Hebrew slaves were liberated from Egypt and settled in the promised land, Sabbath was a gift reminding them that they were no longer slaves and could rest, but they were to also give that gift to their servants and animals- a day of freedom. That freedom and rest reminded them that they were not God. As Lis Harris in her book Holy Days tells the story of asking an Orthodox Jewish family why God cared if she used a microwave on the Friday night, in response the host asked, "What happens when we stop working and controlling nature? When we don't operate machines or pick flowers, or pluck fish from the sea?...when we cease interfering in the world we are acknowledging that it is God's world." ²

Sabbath is not a legalistic commandment. We are to "keep Sabbath" as a way to be kept by God. The 10 Commandments are gift, a way of life that keeps us in right relationship with God and with our community.

So I challenge you to practice Sabbath- to come away with Jesus and find rest for your soul. Like I said earlier, practicing Sabbath is truly counter-cultural and it

is up to us as a church, as families, and as individual Christians to discern how we might do that. While we think of the 10 Commandments as “Don’ts” remember there is a “Do” to them. I have put a website address in the bulletin so that you might refer to suggestions for Sabbath practices. If you do not have access to internet, I have placed copies of this pertinent page in the narthex. You have already chosen to dedicate this day, the Lord’s Day, to worship and reverence.

But I must warn you that if you think Sabbath is about some fluffy, religious idea, then think again.

How would it be for business owners to think about closing one day a week?

How would it be to ask each of us to refrain from commerce- the spending and making of money for a day?

How would it be to ask us to not only take a refreshing walk in the woods with someone you care about, but to consider how your day to day living heals, harms and impacts God’s creation?

Even more radical, how would it be for us to evaluate how the treatment of workers and industry practices defile the Sabbath? Remember it was a day of rest for the servant and the animals, the Biblical means of production and work.

Sabbath rest is a hard notion. It is so much more than not going to the movies or not being able to go to the mall. The Sabbath is holy, it is one of the ways in which we discover the Holiness of God.

Even in our Scripture today, Jesus demonstrates that Sabbath was created for people and not people for the Sabbath. When he saw that there were people in need, he quickly left the disciples to rest and addressed their needs. He sent a message to his disciples and to you and me by telling them to cease.

The message is this:

We are human and not God. We need rest. Let me repeat. We are human and not God.

We need to stop the busyness and to hush our minds that cannot rest from worry or anxiety. We need to “unplug from the matrix” of technology as my friend, Joel Winchip says. We need to come away with God and enjoy the benefits of rest. Jesus will continue his work of salvation in our brief hiatus. We must reconnect our minds, bodies, and spirits, with the King of the Universe and delight in being made whole again, being made right in our relationship with God, with others, and with creation itself.

This November through January one of your pastors, Rodney Norris, will be taking a well-deserved sabbatical. A pastoral sabbatical is a time of ceasing, a time of resting, and time to renew faith in God. Pastors have a high rate of burnout from the sometimes 24/7 demands of ministry. Therapists have

identified a huge problem we face called, “compassion fatigue” because we tend to carry the emotional burdens of so many. Many vocations are at the same risk. I wonder how a Biblical understanding of Sabbath would help shape how we all work in general. Remember Jesus had compassion on the crowd for they were like sheep without a shepherd. He came to shepherd all his children, even the shepherds.

We must remember the truth of this prayer by Augustine, “Our hearts are restless, O God, until they rest in you.”

So the question is, “Will you allow Jesus, the good Shepherd, to lead you? First, will you be his disciple both in the work of mission and sharing the good news? I bet you will be just as excited as those first disciples. And secondly will you enjoy Sabbath? Will you allow his grace, mercy and peace to fill you so that you will be made whole and know salvation and holy rest at last?

If your answer is “Yes” then hear and believe these Scripture promises:

Be still and know that I am God. Psalm 46:10

Come to me all who you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. Matthew 11:28-29

*The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters;
he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake.
Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me;
your rod and your staff they comfort me.
You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long. Psalm 23*

¹A nation of zombies? Sleep deprivation takes toll. By EMILY EUGNER, Associated Press Writer, Tuesday, June 3, 2008 in <http://climate.weather.com/articles/sleepdeprivation060308.html?page=2>

²Mudhouse Sabbath. Lauren Winner. Paraclete Press, Brewster, MA, pp. 6-7