

Pastor Joe Polzin
Mark 6:30-44
“Come and Rest a While”
Year B – Ninth Sunday after Pentecost
July 22, 2018

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

“The apostles returned to Jesus and told him all that they had done and taught. And he said to them, ‘Come away by yourselves to a desolate place and rest a while’” (Mark 6:30-31).

Rest can be hard to come by. But after a time that is physically, emotionally, or spiritually draining, there is nothing better, nothing more needed, than a time of rest. That’s what the disciples felt. They had been out traveling on their apostolic mission, so they were physically tired. They experienced many people who refused them or ran them away, as Jesus warned would happen, so they were emotionally tired. And they had been proclaiming that the kingdom of God was here in a man named Jesus, by healing the sick, casting out demons, and preaching, so no doubt, they would have been spiritually tired, as well.

And Jesus, ever compassionate and aware of the needs of those who follow him, invites them to come with him to gain some much needed rest. Of course, to the disciples’ dismay, they didn’t get that opportunity. At least not yet. The crowds surmised where their boat would land, and met Jesus and the disciples there, crowding in to get a glimpse of the man who had become so famous. Perhaps they could even see a miracle.

The disciples may not have cared much for that. They were exhausted. Right when they thought they could put up their feet and have a moment of quiet rest, life called them back into the fray. But Jesus? Jesus never let a dark thought of resentment cross his mind, or begrudge those who were so demanding of him. Instead, Mark tells us he felt a deep-seated emotion of compassion toward the crowd, because he saw how great their needs were. The crowd’s need for protection, for food, for spiritual guidance, for teaching... for rest. They “were like sheep without a shepherd.” And Jesus was going to be that shepherd. Jesus would be able to provide rest for his disciples, and rest for all who gathered that day.

Of course, we know what happened next. This miracle of the feeding of the five thousand is the only miracle recorded in all four Gospels. But before even that, notice the very first thing Jesus does, after he feels compassion for the crowd. He doesn’t feed them with bread yet. He feeds them with his Word. Mark says he spends the day teaching them many things. Jesus gives of himself, his energy, his time, his compassion by sharing his Word.

The people were being nourished by hearing the message of Jesus, that his kingdom has come in and of himself. That the long-awaited rest of salvation for God’s people, which was promised in the coming of the Messiah, was now here. The time to rest was now, and by hearing his Word, by hearing this Gospel, the people were fed.

Of course, we aren’t simply spiritual people divorced from physical needs. We have both souls *and* bodies. And Jesus knew that. Which is why, when the time was late, and the disciples asked him to send the crowds away, Jesus refused. Jesus insisted that they would be provided with something to eat, and told the disciples to do it. The disciples were astonished. It would cost over half a year’s salary to provide one single meal of bread for that size of a crowd. But again, Jesus knew what he was doing. He knew he would be the one to provide. Provide food, and provide rest.

The details here can't be overlooked. Because what Jesus does next demonstrates he is more than simply a miracle-worker providing a free lunch. Mark says that Jesus "commanded [the people] to sit down in groups on the *green grass*." We may ask, why would Mark include such a detail, unless it were important? And it is important. Remember, they're in a desolate place, in the wilderness. What is green grass doing there anyway? It's there because it shows the restoration of life that comes through the reign and rule of Christ, even to desolate places. The restorative work of the Creator God was beginning there and then in Jesus, who is true God and true man.

What's more, it's far from coincidence that it's the same imagery David uses in Psalm 23: "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures." The crowds were like sheep without a shepherd. So the Shepherd God enters the breach, and leads them to rest in green grass, so that he may feed them and give them rest.

After that, Jesus organized the crowd in groups of hundreds and fifties (v. 40). Reasonable to do, we may think, especially if you're going to do a large-scale bread distribution. But again, no detail in Scripture is coincidence. It was Moses who was leading the Israelites in the wilderness, in a desolate place, after their exodus from Egypt. And he organized the people into similar sized groups of thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens (Ex. 18), so that he could more effectively shepherd them. And when the Israelites were hungry in the wilderness, it was God who satisfied their hunger, providing the manna bread from heaven and quail.

When the crowd was organized before him, Jesus multiplies the five loaves and two fish, and "they all ate and were satisfied" (v.42). And this was more than simply filling their stomachs. This was yet another instance of the Almighty Creator God providing for His people, providing for their hunger, yes, but also for their every need, especially their need of security and salvation. And so here was Jesus, God in the flesh, doing so again for those who were weary. Bringing them a glimpse and a taste of the eternal rest that is found in him.

We, too, are weary... and we, too, need rest. Our lives here on earth, while they may find occasional times of peacefulness by God's gracious hand, they are not restful. We are constantly plagued by the three enemies that human beings have always been plagued with since the Fall: the devil, our own sinful nature, and ultimately death. We are harassed by our weaknesses, which the devil is all too happy to exploit. We are brought low by others who sin against us, but even lower when we see our own shortcomings and depravity. And every time we see someone struggle with disease, or we know that struggle all too well ourselves, or every time that we lose someone we love, we are reminded that our existence can't help but lead to same destination—in our death. Yes, in this life, we are weary... and in need of rest.

I must admit, I stand here today a little weary myself. The past several months have proven to hit my family pretty hard with disease and death, which continued again yesterday as I lost my grandmother. And for many of you, I'm well aware of the weariness in your lives, and what you face. This life can be hard, and can seem to wear us down. And in and of ourselves, we have no way to counter this constant attack, this incessant harassment.

But unfortunately, it doesn't stop many people from trying all sorts of ways to find some sort of respite on their own, some sort of rest. Some turn to alcohol. Some turn to drugs. The latest opioid epidemic is only symptomatic of a society who desperately needs to find some kind of release and rest, even if it means killing their bodies in the process. Some turn to losing themselves in their work. Some turn to eating excessively. Some turn to love, hoping to find some rest in the embrace of another. Many people turn to all sorts of things, all in an attempt to self-medicate, self-shepherd, self-rest.

But it's all in vain. And we, the sheep, can actually *make* ourselves shepherd-less, as we try to lead ourselves. But all we end up doing is wandering aimlessly, and oblivious to, or perhaps willingly ignorant of, the deadly perils that are around every turn, every ridge, every day.

But Jesus comes to us, and invites us to himself. He, the Shepherd God, steps into the breach. He fills the void that we so vainly are trying to fill ourselves, and shows us that he is the only one who can provide true and plentiful rest. And he has done so for each of us. "Come to me," Jesus says, "all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matt. 11:28).

The Shepherd knew he had to overcome and defeat every enemy that would harass and kill his sheep. Put his flock in danger. So, in a complete reversal, the Shepherd became the Lamb, and was killed upon the cross. And in so doing, he showed that he indeed is the "Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." But the Lamb did not remain slain, but was victorious, as he rose again, showing that it would never be sin nor the devil nor death that would ever be able to lay claim to those who are in his care, in his flock. Those to whom he gives perfect rest.

It's what he gave those crowds upon whom he had compassion, and the disciples, when he invited them to rest with him on the green grass in the midst of a desolate place, where he fed them with both his Word and with bread, and by doing so, provided them with a glimpse and a foretaste of his everlasting rest.

Today, and every Sunday, is a chance for you to experience this rest, as well. You are gathered as his flock in this sanctuary, this house of God. Jesus invites you to rest with him in the midst of the desolate places of your life, and here, he will feed you with his Word and with the bread of life. And by doing so, he provides you with a glimpse and a foretaste of his everlasting rest. Rest that is prepared for you. Rest that is yours right now. "Come and rest a while." In Jesus' name. Amen.

And now may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord.