

“Building Our Lives: We Need Rest” Rev. Patricia Weatherwax, June 18, 2017

Hear the word of the LORD, from the book that we love:

Hebrews 4:1-11 NRSV

Therefore, while the promise of entering his rest is still open, let us take care that none of you should seem to have failed to reach it. For indeed the good news came to us just as to them; but the message they heard did not benefit them, because they were not united by faith with those who listened. For we who have believed enter that rest, just as God has said,

“As in my anger I swore, ‘They shall not enter my rest,’”

though his works were finished at the foundation of the world. For in one place it speaks about the seventh day as follows, “And God rested on the seventh day from all his works.” And again in this place it says, “They shall not enter my rest.” Since therefore it remains open for some to enter it, and those who formerly received the good news failed to enter because of disobedience, again he sets a certain day —“today”—saying through David much later, in the words already quoted,

“Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.”

For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not speak later about another day. So then, a sabbath rest still remains for the people of God; for those who enter God’s rest also cease from their labors as God did from his. Let us therefore make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one may fall through such disobedience as theirs.

The word of the LORD, thanks be to God!

INTRODUCTION

I’ve often said that I really only preach one sermon, over and over: “Life is hard, God is with us.” This is pretty much the larger sermon of Hebrews, too. You may remember that the letter we call Hebrews reads like a sermon manuscript or transcript. As a sermon, it’s a pep talk for a congregation that needs to be reminded that Christians aren’t promised roses without thorns. Instead, we hear that we are more than our past, that the promises of God are for all eternity, and there is still nothing better than knowing and trusting Jesus, now. You hear lots of encouragements and affirmations in this sermon called Hebrews.

There’s a lot more we could say in general about about this document, but today let’s focus on something that apparently this congregation needed to hear, that sometimes we forget as 21st century Christ followers. Especially, and specifically:

We need rest!

Happy Father’s Day! All of you who are a father or had a father, probably do not get enough rest. If you are honoring a Father today, just know that a restful, peaceful afternoon nap may be what he really wants. Hebrews 4 reminds us of that. It speaks to three different types and times of rest.

WE NEEDED REST, PAST TENSE, from labors and action

There's God's fine example for us from the creation narrative- and the preacher of Hebrews says it this way- we heard it read earlier in its context from our first Old Testament lesson.

"And God rested on the seventh day from all his works." v 4

Whether you take the story totally literally, which I think since it talks about "days" 4 days before **our** day indicator the sun appears- it should be understood from a divine not human perspective. God just might tell time differently than we do? Probably.

So we read this creation narrative as an explanation for our *understanding* of what's important. Note well, *rest* was **created** along with everything else. We should notice from Genesis 1, that rest was created and necessary *even before* sin entered the world! We don't need rest because of our burdens from sin and toil. We need rest because God created it! And if God needed a day off from work, why would we think we didn't? You are probably tired today because you didn't get enough rest this past week, month, year, decade. Spiritual nurture, and emotional refreshment, along with physical rest are all necessary for our shalom- our well-being.

Rest isn't defined only as sabbath keeping. The text speaks about *Joshua* not granting rest. That refers to the people of God finally accomplishing entry into the "promised land" but still not being at rest there. After accomplishing a specific goal, it's wise to celebrate and rest! It's good to take a break. Our adult mission Caravan members needed extra rest this weekend!

Just not forever. We don't "rest on our laurels". An influential spiritual guide, the AA Big Book says:

It is easy to let up on the spiritual program of action, and rest on our laurels.

We're headed for trouble if we do.... What we really have is ... contingent on the maintenance of our spiritual condition. Every day is a day when we must carry the vision of God's will into all of our activities. "How can I best serve Thee - Thy will (not mine) be done." These are thoughts which must go with us constantly.

(AA Big Book page 85).

Maybe some of you are at a resting place. You who are retired may think you can retire from labor, and coast from now on, but God always has purposes for us. Rest some, but not entirely! Our labors may change over the decades, our the priority doesn't change. And, what might that priority, that **chief end** be? Who knows their catechism? Our "**chief end** (why we are here), is to glorify God, and to enjoy God forever". Thus the **chief end** of Christians and of the church is to bring glory to God. There are lots of ways to do that, without regard to our age and stage. And we know:

the Spirit helps us in our weakness; ... God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. (Romans 8:26-28)

God's purpose for us is to work and rest, rest and work! Balance. God knows we *needed* rest, and that-

WE NEED REST TODAY (PRESENT TENSE) during labors and stresses

Look again at verse 7:

God sets a certain day—'today'—saying through David much later, in the words already quoted, "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts." v7 Because there's other rest too, besides routine sabbath rest and rest after accomplishing a difficult task. There's the rest associated with letting go of our hard hearts. Do you deny having a hard heart? OK. Maybe it's letting go of your broken heart or your angry heart or your unforgiving heart. The rest we need today, and everyday is the rest that comes with surrendering our stressors to God. It's not surprising that one of the world's most well-known prayers is one attributed to Reinhold Niebuhr and used a lot by recovery groups; the prayer we **all** need to pray every day: "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I can not change".

An unknown inspirational poet wrote it this way:

*As children bring their broken toys with tears for us to mend,
I brought my broken dreams to God because he is my friend.
But instead of leaving him - in peace- to work alone,
I hung around and tried to help with ways that were my own.
I finally snatched them back and said,
"How could you be so slow?"
My child, God said, "what could I do?"
"You never would let go."*

The thing about the rest that comes with surrendering that which hardens our heart is that it sometimes letting go feels like work! Whatever our heartfelt burden is, it needs to be addressed, surrendered, abstained from, on a constant daily basis. Today we can rest from worry, fear, anxiety, refrain from trying to control that which is out of our control.

Can we pray like Jesus: "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit?" Today? Today can we aim to live claiming the fruit of the spirit? Rest in all the "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control" (Gal 5:22) that God wants us to accept as we surrender the hate, worry, fear, impatience, revenge, criticism and out of control attitudes and behaviors that come so naturally for us. **Today.**

Rest from all of it today, and then one more day after that, one at a time. I just noticed the other day that some specific prayers I'd sent *many* years ago were being answered now, in God's gradual, amazing and good ways. Surrender to rest today, remembering that God's today, God's calendar may be very different than ours.

And especially know what Hebrews 4 reminds us:

"a sabbath rest still remains for the people of God; for those who enter God's rest also cease from their labors as God did from his." So,

WE ARE ASSURED OF REST, in our FUTURE

Someday we will not have the stressors that we have today, the ones that we need to constantly surrender to Christ's care. The bonds and sins and relationship struggles that lead us to feeling overwhelmed and tired will be gone, some day. Today we have a "future with hope" (Jeremiah 29:11). Our Hebrews 4 text says it this way:

So then, a sabbath rest *still remains* for the people of God; for those who enter God's rest also cease from their labors as God did from his. Let us therefore make every effort to enter that rest. (Hebrews 4:7-11)

Christology, how Christ accomplishes our salvation was being explored and defined in the first century, that's mostly why Hebrews was being written. Jesus did not preach salvation by our working hard, or by our efforts of following the Law. The letter to the Ephesians was also a work from this era. It was bold to say:

“For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast” (Eph 2:8-9).

It's not how good we are, but how good God is. And some day we will enter the place Jesus spoke about in John 14: 2, when he said: “I'm going to prepare a place for you” .

There's some interesting opinions about heaven and what we will “do” there. “Rest” seems like it would be good, for a while, but forever? That's another thing that has not been fully revealed to us. But, in heaven we will continue with our “chief end -to glorify God, and to enjoy God forever”. That's good news; heaven will be “enjoyable” forever.

Some Christian writers suggest that we will have the ability to explore all of God's creation- that since the heavens declare the glory of God (Psalm 19:1) so we will be able to be in other dimensions and galaxies, maybe even in other ways. It will *not* be boring, being in God's rest. It will be always good.

Back when I was a seminary student I interned as a hospice chaplain-in-training. I was reading Joni Eareckson Tada's book “*Heaven: Your Real Home*” to a young bedridden woman in the late stages of a progressive neuromuscular disease. It probably isn't the exact passage, but I know I read something like this:

Heaven will not be an unmaking of all the good things we know, but a new and vastly improved version. Heaven will also be an undoing of all the bad things we know as God wipes away every tear and closes the curtain on pain and disappointment (p. 29).

I remember she used one of her very few still discernible words as I read to her of the peace and wholeness she would experience, She said: “Wow!”

CONCLUSION

Do you need to make rest or sabbath keeping a bigger part of your life? Are you in or out of balance regarding labor and rest? Do you need to surrender some stresses, or relax knowing that heaven is waiting for you when God says it's time? Neibuhr's full version of the Serenity prayer tells us what we need:

God, give me grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed,
 Courage to change the things which should be changed,
 and the Wisdom to distinguish the one from the other.
 Living one day at a time, Enjoying one moment at a time,
 Accepting hardship as a pathway to peace,
 Taking, as Jesus did, this sinful world as it is, not as I would have it,
 Trusting that You will make all things right, if I surrender to Your will,
 So that I may be reasonably happy in this life,
 And supremely happy with You forever in the next.
 Amen

and Amen.