

The Reverend Jon Hauerwas – July 18, 2021 – Rest for a While
Psalm 89:20-29, 35-37 and Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

Foreshadowing what is to come and serving as a clear indication “that the way that they see him is too limited,” Jesus is rejected by childhood friends and acquaintances residing in his hometown.¹ Even so, he pushes ahead, carrying out a ministry of teaching, healing, and making disciples.

There is no naivety here. Jesus understands the significance of speaking truth to power. He knows that, by any measure, serving as a divine mouthpiece is perilous work. The inherent dangers were on full display when Herod Antipas ordered John the Baptist to be killed before parading his head through the banquet hall on a platter.

Still, Jesus is confident in his calling as he boldly fills the leadership vacuum. He welcomes John’s disciples, easily assimilating many of them into his movement. And then, Jesus sends out his own, closest followers in pairs to minister to the masses beyond the bounds of Nazareth. This is where we find the Twelve in our second lesson this morning. Having just completed their mission, they return to Jesus eager to share all that they have done and taught.

¹ Richard W. Voelz, *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, Year B, Volume 3*, ed. Joel B. Green, (Westminster John Knox Press, 2021), 143.

Jesus listens intently. He is proud of their accomplishments. But, he also senses that the adrenaline high has worn off. Beyond their obvious excitement, he observes their dusty feet, their sunken eyes, their slouched posture. And he knows that, in their exhaustion, now is the time for a pep talk, for signs of his approval, and for Sabbath rest.

John Buchanan notes that “Sabbath is deep in Hebrew tradition, a fundamental biblical idea. God works for six days in the creation story and on the seventh day God rests.”² In other words, “God knows when to stop and rest. God knows how to step back, take a deep breath, and enjoy what God has created.”³

So it is curious, isn’t it, that we often forget to rest? Or, even worse, we willfully ignore it. Just consider our own nation, which is so enamored with the pace of our hurried existence, and so certain that busyness is synonymous with importance, that we just keep going, pledging our assistance until there is little left to give.

² John M. Buchanan, *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, Year B, Volume 3*, ed. Joel B. Green, (Westminster John Knox Press, 2021), 177.

³ Buchanan, 177.

Quite simply, the concept of a weekly Sabbath has not merely lost its grip on American society, it has completely disappeared from modern life. And in its place, we have substituted the reality of incessant, nonstop work.⁴ So let me ask, how is that going for us?

Are we all satisfied with the level of last month's production? Or with the frenzied accumulation of wealth, or status, or things? Are we satisfied with the obvious strain that we have placed on our planet? Or with the accusatory nature of our political discourse?

Clearly, we are not. And in the midst of so much dissatisfaction with the modern way of life, we soon recognize that we, too, are people in need of a pep talk, and divine approval, and a Sabbath rest. And so, we present ourselves at the feet of Jesus, eager to share all that we have done, and even more eager to hear a good word in response.

In our second lesson this morning, Jesus seeks to minister to the needs of the Twelve. He says to them, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." It's one of those moments in life when it's as if the symphony has just

⁴ Buchanan, 177.

begun. This is the invitation that the disciples desperately long to hear. And so, with gladness, they join him in the effort to slip away quietly.

Celebrities, though, do not sneak away easily. Someone is always watching. On this occasion, many eyes have witnessed their departure. And just as the disciples begin to relax in their newfound hideout, “the world, as it so often does, intercedes.”

⁵ Even on their day off, they have been followed. Jesus has called for this rest, and they hope that he will honor it. They plead with him to exert his authority and dismiss the crowds. Instead, he adapts.

Jesus changes the agenda, not because he is weak, but because he is filled with compassion for the crowds, for “they were like sheep without a shepherd, and he began to teach them many things.” Jesus observes their humanity, their desperation, their deepest longings. And, in response, he feels something at the core of his being, which causes him to reassess the situation.

Max Lee explains it well when he writes, “while Jesus understands the importance of a strategic withdrawal from work and the need to create a sacred space for a Sabbath rest, he also remains available and flexible to the pastoral care of God’s

⁵ Buchanan, 177.

people.”⁶ Here, compassion flows freely. Yes. The same topic that we have just spent one week exploring in Vacation Bible School is equally applicable to the Twelve and to us. We never graduate from reminders to be more compassionate.

Well, as you can imagine, when one is preparing for a sermon, you notice things throughout the week that relate to the scriptures that you have been studying. This morning, an article appeared in my newsfeed featuring a photograph of Nelson Mandela. The accompanying headline suggested that what we really need in the world today is more radical empathy.

I think that we all know where this is going. Radical empathy involves knowing others on a personal level. It means entering into the story that our neighbors have to tell. Radical empathy is undeterred the face of other people’s pain or differences of opinion And radical empathy is willing to walk a mile in someone else’s shoes.

By promoting empathy and compassion, Jesus was not putting on a show. Instead, he was living into the image of who God had authentically called him to be.

⁶ Max J. Lee, *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, Year B, Volume 3*, ed. Joel B. Green, (Westminster John Knox Press, 2021), 177.

This is the one who was “born in a stable,” and “introduced to the agony of refugees as a child.”⁷ This is the one who, as an adult, lived as a wandering teacher who had no house of his own (Matt. 8:20). Yes. Wherever he went, great crowds gathered. “The poor flocked to him. He fed and healed the needy.”⁸ And he regularly ministered to those who toiled endlessly with little promise of reward.

In Galilee, where Jesus was raised, about 90 percent of the residents lived at the subsistence level or below it. There was no middle class.⁹ “Slaveholders and landowners controlled most of the land, people, and wealth.”¹⁰ The Romans lords were taskmasters, uninterested “in the well-being, prosperity, and rest of their subjects except to compel more work from them.”¹¹ And at the sight of their poverty, Jesus is moved to compassion.¹² He attends to their needs.

Friends, as you consider your own journey with Christ, I pray that you will find moments for rest and renewal that will strengthen you for the work ahead. And when the call of compassion arises in your heart, I pray that you will serve fully, and faithfully, and well. May it be so and all thanks be to God.

⁷ Ronald J. Sider, *Good News and Good Works: A Theology for the Whole Gospel*, (Baker Books, 1999), 62.

⁸ Sider, 62.

⁹ Lee, 176.

¹⁰ Liz Theoharis, *Always with Us? What Jesus Really Said about the Poor*, (Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2017), 83.

¹¹ Theoharis, 68.

¹² Lee, 176 and Buchanan, 177.