

## “Living in the Shadows: Weariness”

Matthew 11:25-30

March 31, 2019

It was the kind of conversation that takes place often when groups of pastors gather around a pot of coffee to share ideas and encouragement. We were discussing a recent article in *Forbes* magazine ranking the nine leadership positions that impose the greatest burdens on those who pursue them. Interestingly, pastors landed at number five, situated between football coaches and mayors. To relieve the suspense and save you the Google search, number one was Stay-at-Home Parent.<sup>1</sup> (Can I get an Amen to that?). Our discussion revolved around the poor example we pastors set if we are constantly stressed out, overworked, and plagued by fatigue. We described our efforts to be all things to all people and the resulting disappointment when this proves impossible. We commiserated about the unmanageable pace of life, resulting in an epidemic of exhaustion. One member of the group observed that the most routinely broken commandment in our time is the fourth—remember the Sabbath and keep it holy.

I imagine that most of you can relate. It is one of the most common struggles I hear voiced by people of all ages—a stress-filled busyness that leaves little time for reflection or rest. In the midst of far too many options and tugs on our time, we struggle to prioritize or find room to exhale. From young children whose schedules are already filled with activity, to teenagers whose stress level is through the roof, to parents whose daily grind begins well before sunrise and extends late into the evening, to older adults whose lives often center on caring for a loved one, managing family anxieties, or navigating the health care system, what I hear is a cacophony of discordant voices claiming so much of our time and energy that we are left feeling drained and lifeless.

Indeed, weariness might be the most pervasive and easily recognized of our Lenten shadows this season. Weariness signifies both physical exhaustion and emotional or spiritual resignation. We may be tired for short periods, but weariness sets in over the long haul, and is not remedied simply by a weekend getaway or an afternoon nap. We grow weary not just from working too hard or staying too busy, but from constant effort to hold the world together by our own will

and effort. Weariness is a close relative of hopelessness, a sign that our spiritual batteries are depleted and in need of recharging. The shadow of weariness hovers overhead as we balance our need to get through the day with our desire to find meaning in it all. Spiritual exhaustion, we might call it.

And don't we live in a weary world? This week, as I've listened to news coverage and talking heads debate the implications of this and that development, my primary emotional response has been weariness. Weary from the “who's up and who's down” nature of contemporary politics. Weary from personal attacks that amount to not one ounce of positive change. Weary by the implications of our treatment of others for the generation yet to come and for the health of our democracy. And my weariness pales in comparison to that of our neighbors whose lives are most at risk in the midst of it all.

In a time when there is no rest for the weary, the words of Jesus this morning constitute an invitation to an alternative way of life. He offers it not to the self-sufficient or the ambitious, but to those who are weary and carrying heavy burdens. In other words, he offers it to us. This morning, as we entered the sanctuary, each one of us was dragging behind us a heaviness that overwhelms us. I don't know which burdens you carried with you, but I can make some educated guesses. Some carried the burden of worry—worry for the future, for our children, our grandchildren, our parents, ourselves. Others brought along the burden of stress—deadlines looming, bills due, exams around the corner, more to be done than time to do it. Perhaps some of you shouldered a heavy load of pain—broken relationships, harsh words spoken in anger, a heart heavy with grief and loneliness. The burdens we bear are legion, each unique to the circumstances of our lives and yet common to the human condition. And the weight of the burdens we bear only adds to the weariness we feel. And the more we are plagued by weariness, the more anxious we become. We seek release from anxiety by working harder, sleeping less, cutting off relationships, bearing down or lashing out. The vicious cycle of weariness tragically draws us farther and

farther away from the very rest we seek to find.

A couple comes home at the end of a long day. It has been days, perhaps weeks, since they have had a conversation about anything other than managing the daily schedule. The distance between them has grown into a chasm and the energy necessary to rebuild that bridge is fading. Silently, they brush their teeth and prepare for bed. So many words unspoken, so much pain unexpressed. Just too tired to talk tonight. Exhausted by the demands of the day. Maybe we'll find the time tomorrow. The shadows of weariness block the light of new possibility.

A high school student pours over her math homework well after midnight. She remembers the carefree days of elementary school, when life seemed so simple. Now the stress of classes, the demands of extracurricular activities, the constant struggle to keep up, the fear of disappointing parents and teachers, has taken all the joy and left a sense of apathy. The shadows of weariness crowd in where the light of enthusiasm once burned brightly.

A man sits in his chair staring blankly at the screen in front of him. It's been eighteen months since his wife's death and the days seem to stretch on without end. He longs for a visit from his grandchildren but he knows how busy they are and doesn't want to be an inconvenience...a burden. Weary from the monotony of life and the pain of loss, he wonders when rest will come

Can you relate? Have you felt the backbreaking weight of weariness?

Then hear the words of Jesus Christ, spoken to you: "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest." For just a moment, consider the possibility that we are the weary ones to whom Jesus offers the gift of rest. The invitation Jesus offers us is an invitation to himself—"come to me." It is as if the rest we so desperately seek is best found not by ceaseless grasping but by letting go. We do not earn or achieve Sabbath, we receive it as a gift. Finding rest for our souls involves trusting that the world does not depend on our efforts to keep spinning. Perhaps deep down you, like me, prefer to think of yourself as indispensable. But the truth is that God's providence is not dependent on us.

In her book, *An Altar in the World*, Barbara Brown Taylor describes Sabbath-keeping as "the practice of saying no." It might be the most difficult word in the English language.

Taylor writes, "Anyone who practices Sabbath for even an afternoon usually suffers a little spell of Sabbath sickness. Try it and you too may be amazed by how quickly your welcome rest begins to feel like something closer to a bad cold. Okay, that was nice. Okay, you are ready to get back to work now. Yes, you know you said you wanted this, but now you have had just the right amount of rest—maybe even a touch too much—so that you are beginning to feel sluggish. Plus, how will you ever catch up after taking a whole day off? Just thinking about it makes you tired." Taylor offers this suggestion, "If a whole day of life-giving freedom is too much for you to imagine, then start however you can. Decide that you will get up an hour before everyone else in the house and dedicate that time to doing nothing but being in the divine presence. Decide that you will turn off the television an hour before you go to bed and spend that time outside looking at the sky. You could resolve not to add anything more to your calendar without subtracting something from it. You could practice praising yourself for saying no as lavishly as you do when you say yes." <sup>ii</sup>

All of these simple practices point to the same truth: that our preciousness in God's sight, our worthiness of love and grace, is not dependent on our ceaseless striving. Even if it is only for one hour each week, we are invited to lay down our burdens of anxiety and weariness and trust that God will not abandon us. If only for a fleeting moment, we can accept the fact that we are enough, that we are loved precisely as we are. No extra effort required.

The words Jesus offers this morning are prefaced by a prayer of thanksgiving to God. In that prayer, Jesus says that God has hidden this truth from the wise and the intelligent and revealed it to infants. That is, those who do not rely on their own efforts for salvation, who are able to receive a gift. This makes more sense to me now, because my new instructor in the art of rest is Benjamin, our two-year-old son. After a couple of hours of active play, running through the house, bounding up and down stairs, throwing balls and pushing cars, Ben begins to communicate his need for rest. Sometimes, that comes in the form of tears. If we catch the signals soon enough, and place Ben in his crib, he looks up with a grin, turns on his side, and drifts into sleep. The rhythms of life do not change all that much as we age. We too can pay attention for signs of weariness: tears, anger, disorientation, a compulsion to control the world. And when we are overcome by the shadow of weariness, we can hear the words of Jesus as an invitation offered directly to us.

This Lent, instead of giving up chocolate or soda, try Sabbath-keeping. Take some time each day and set it aside for the practice of quiet. For resting in God and allowing God to rest in you. You will feel kinder and gentler toward yourself and other people. You will feel closer to God and to your true created self. You may just feel the heavy burdens lifted and the weariness fading away as you hear the words of Jesus, “Come to me.” Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> <http://www.forbes.com/sites/robasghar/2014/02/25/ranking-the-9-toughest-leadership-roles/>

<sup>ii</sup> <http://www.beliefnet.com/Faiths/Christianity/2010/05/Why-God-Wants-You-to-Rest.aspx>