

“The Reason for Rest”
July 26, 2020

Isaiah 40:21-31
Psalm 102:1-12
Matthew 11:28-30

Sometimes it seems like déjà vu all over again.

Covid-19 cases are surging across our nation and in our state.

The President is giving daily briefings and the Governor proclaims her faith that Iowans will do what’s right even as she ignores the pleas of local government officials.

People are worried about their businesses and their jobs and Congress struggles to come up with a timely solution.

School schedules are up in the air.

In case you’ve lost track, since it is easy to do, it is July, not March or May.

Going through all of this again, we hear the offer of Jesus: “I will give you rest.”

These words fall softly on those who have weary hearts and are worn out by life. They come as a relief to those who seek to do the right thing and are burdened by their conscience. They light up the path ahead for those who live in the shadows of guilt and remorse.

That is to say, these are the words that you have been waiting to hear.

“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I have gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

If we could just let those gracious words flood over us, my task this morning would be as easy as the yoke of Jesus. All I would need to do is speak these words of comfort and reassurance to you once more and wrap things up early on this July day.

As is always the case, however, there is yet more truth and light to break forth from these words.

Let’s first recognize that those words of Jesus move us to confession. While Jesus tells us that his yoke is easy and his burden is light, we in the church have so often been ready to place heavy burdens on others—and even upon ourselves!

The New Testament tells of early Christians quickly wanting to regulate what people ate and how they dressed.

Women were apostles and deacons, but soon the church told them, “Those are not options for you.”

After finding religious freedom in the New World, the faithful quickly began codifying their religion as law. The faithful free in both the North and South long profited from a system that depended on the enslavement of others.

And let's be honest: there is even the danger in liberal, thoughtful congregations such as this one that we will seek to have everyone thinking the same thoughts. We can respect *questions*. The challenge comes when we have to respect the different *answers* that people discover.

Our confession helps us understand those who want to throw off the heavy yoke of religion.

Those who avoid religion and its perceived strictures are usually responding to some awful experience with those who would impose their way of thinking and acting onto others.

Maybe you know people who have had such experiences. Maybe *you* have had such experiences. Some members of our congregation kept themselves away from any church for years because it was specifically *in churches* that they were told there are limits on what one could think and what questions one could ask. It was specifically *in churches* that they met with intolerance, or bigotry, or pathological control, or abuse. It was *in churches* they found a hard yoke and a heavy burden.

When they finally stumbled across this place and found the courage to walk through our doors, they were surprised by what they found: a community of openness, a church that seeks to live in the freedom of the gospel. The good news of these days is that even when our doors are closed, people are still discovering that this is a place of refuge and welcome. The message that we proclaim is reaching people *around the world* with the affirming love of God.

We don't always get it right, you know that. But we seek to follow the Jesus whom we see again and again in conflict with the religious leaders of his day. He speaks out against those who worry about religious details while ignoring or avoiding the weightier demands of love, compassion and mercy. He warns against straining out the gnat and swallowing a camel—what a wonderful image.

We need to be careful here, however, because Christians have all too often turned this conflict within first-century Judaism into an attack on Jewish people, taking upon ourselves the heavy yoke of anti-Semitism.

But Jesus tells those who would follow him that we are cut loose from the onerous demands of religion at its worst. We can set aside the burdens others have placed upon us. We can set aside the burdens that we place upon ourselves. We can take off the yoke that weighs heavily on our souls. We are set free to find our own way.

In that freedom we come closer to understanding what Jesus means when he says that in him we will find rest for our souls.

Jesus is not speaking here of rest as inactivity.

He offers the rest that is the renewal of strength after vigorous activity, the rest that restores us for further—even greater—work.

When you do the difficult work of forgiving someone, you need rest for your soul before you go out and do that again.

When you have been far more generous than you might ever have expected, you need to renew your strength so that your generosity can continue to grow.

When you have fed the hungry or worked to rebuild places of devastation, well, you need rest because you will most likely be called to similar acts of compassion in the future.

When you make it through yet another day or week or month of these demanding and exhausting days, you need to renew your strength so that you can once again greet the coming dawn.

This is the kind of renewal spoken of not only by Jesus but by the prophet Isaiah.

As I said, I read some of those words in worship a few weeks ago. It does no harm to hear them again, however, and this time to linger over them for a few minutes. In those powerful and perhaps familiar words the prophet tells us, in no uncertain terms, that we are not God. We are not the Creator, who is far greater than the creation. For thousands of years human beings have needed just such a reminder and it we still benefit from hearing it today.

When the calculations comparing our smallness with God's greatness are finished, we can react to our position in the universe in several ways.

We can slink away in despair.

We can lash out in denial.

Or we can rest in God's great, restoring love. Isaiah proclaimed that this God who is unequalled and beyond comparison regards this creation with an equally incomparable love. God has no inconsequential creatures or untended corners of the universe. God tells us how precious we are in God's sight—which is good news—and God also tells us how precious the entire creation is.

In this way, God gives power to the faint and strengthens the powerless—people like you and me.

When we wait for the Lord, we act out of a sense of who we are and who God is—not confusing the two. We recognize our limitations *and* our abilities.

When we wait for the Lord, we continue to work for reconciliation in a world that prefers conflict.

When we wait for the Lord, we move forward even when we cannot see very far down the road.

When we wait for the Lord, we continue to affirm the value of each person even as the voices of hate get louder.

When we wait for the Lord, we continue in our busy and uncertain and demanding lives to love one another.

And so, when we wait for the Lord we also need to accept the easy yoke and the rest that is offered to us.

Let me quickly suggest two ways in which we might find rest for our souls. These suggestions are in no way exhaustive—and you, no doubt, can add many items to it. My hope is that these suggestions might stir your own imaginations and that you will share with others how to find rest and renewal.

I would suggest that we *begin with enjoyment*.

In our Congregational tradition, we are informed by the Reformation confession that tells us that the chief end of human beings, our ultimate purpose, is to glorify and *enjoy* God. Those things in which we take delight can be wells at which we drink when our souls are dry and thirsty.

When family life is wearing you out, recall those things that you enjoy about being a parent, a spouse. Pursue them.

When compassion fatigue sets in, recall the joy that you have found in giving.

What gives you enjoyment? What do you need to do so that you can experience that more often?

Our souls are renewed as well by *perspective*, the ability to see the big picture. Perspective is “the capacity to see what is really important in any given situation.” This is especially important in these days. It is connected to prayer because the habit of reflection is critical to acquiring a sense of perspective. And reflection is simply not possible unless some time each day is devoted to silence.

Silence allows us to reflect on the higher purpose, to question our decisions in the light of that purpose, and to seek strength not to betray it. It allows us to listen to the inner stirrings of the spirit.

We find rest for our souls. And, as I said, you know many other ways to receive the renewal of your spirit that God desires for each of us.

The yoke is easy.

The burden is light.

Be open in the days ahead—as strange and taxing as they are—be open to receive anew those things that fill and renew you so that you can continue your life with gratitude and grace.