

“Rest, Restore and Renew”

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Please pray with me: Holy God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be faithful and pleasing unto you, for you are our rock and our salvation. Amen.

When I was in my early 30s, I got my first job as a professor. I had 3 young children who were 7, 5, and 1, and I commuted 4 days a week, 1 hour each way. I worked about 60 hours a week. After about a year, I remember a frantic call to my mom, telling her I was completely exhausted and I didn't know what to do. At first, she tried to tell me that I needed to rest more, but when I layed out what my life was like—the minute to minute details—she realized that there was actually very little space in my day for a full rest. She paused for a minute and then told me that all of creation has moments of rest—the sun sets each evening so the world can rest; the winter comes and lets the earth rest; we sleep at night to restore our bodies; even the body, all day, finds moments to rest. The heart, for example, seems like it is constantly beating, but it isn't. In between each beat, the heart pauses for a mili-second and rests. There are times, my mom said, when you do have to keep going, but you can still find small moments of rest throughout the day. Instead of letting your thoughts be consumed by stress, contemplate beauty when looking out the window while doing dishes; pray and sing while you drive to work; close your eyes and breathe deeply while drinking your morning coffee. Find ways to rest in between the heartbeats.

My Dear Ones, Covid has changed our lives in such a way that finding time to rest is impossible for some. In addition to the many responsibilities so many of us face, working families are now balancing work with helping kids with on-line learning, as well as balancing all the stress caused by these uncertain times. Caregivers of all types now have the extra stress of extra cleaning, extra safety measures, all of which take extra time. Learning how to use Zoom, telehealth, and other on-line platforms takes time. Modern technology is a gift that allows us to have on-line learning, on-line meetings for work, and on-line worship, but it turns out that on-line conferences of all kinds are more tiring than working in person; Zoom fatigue is a real thing. Many of us are tired, stressed, exhausted. As the author of Acts puts it, we find ourselves searching and groping for God, trying to make holy spaces in our homes, but the stress and exhaustion of life can make it feel like God is difficult to find.

And so, this Labor Day weekend seems like a good time to contemplate how to rest. Labor Day, itself, was created to honor our service workers—those people whose lives have now been put on the line so that we can get our groceries, get our hair cut, get our Amazon products. It is meant to be a time of rest for them, yet most service workers are required to work tomorrow. How will they find rest?

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus consistently models good resting behavior. If you read the book from beginning to end, you'll see that Jesus seems constantly busy. Wherever he goes, he is asked to heal and teach. Yet he is constantly taking breaks to pray, especially after a long day of work. He sits in a garden alone, goes into the wilderness, off to the lakeshore, or to a mountain.

As we've talked about before, going out into nature can also offer a close connection to God. Our Old Testament lesson today, Psalm 23, offers us beautiful imagery about how we can find rest and renewal:

“God maketh me to lie down in green pastures and leadeth me beside still waters. He restoreth my soul.” Stretching and reaching towards God turn out not to be necessary. Our souls are renewed and healed through the quiet meditation of nature and beauty, and through rest. So what our souls need is a time to listen for how the Holy Spirit might be speaking to us, to share our thoughts and feelings with God.

If we cannot get out into nature, there are other ways to rest with God, such as reading scripture or devotionals, silently communing with God, talking about faith, theology or scripture (even our doubts) with others, journaling about these issues, or singing hymns or praise songs. But some of us cannot get even a break in our day that is longer than a few moments. When I took my mom's advice, I found that it helped immensely, especially if I somehow connected with God in those moments. If I could start my day with a very short devotional or by reading a Psalm over coffee, I was then able to contemplate those ideas in moments between activities throughout the day. Truly, one minute of silently meditating upon God, or imaging myself walking by still waters, or even just clearing my mind and just being with God—all of these things brought me rest. The point is to turn the mind and heart towards God in our moments, hours, or days of rest. Usually, when we do this, we find that we truly find not just rest, but renewal. The Psalm provides us an image of a cup running over; the cup of our beings are not just filled when we rest and commune with God; it is renewed to the point that love and energy pour out from us, running over into the world around us, nourishing them, as well.

But I want to speak also to those who might find themselves with the opposite problem—to the not-super-busy. Covid has made the challenges faced by the disabled, the ill, the not-working folks even worse, leaving many of them more isolated, sometimes more lonely, and more uncertain of their purpose. This is a feeling I know well. Some of you know this story, but I would like to reshare it anyway.

Back when I was incredibly sick some years ago and stuck in bed most of the day, I spoke with my pastor, asking about how I might pray, especially at a time when I found it difficult to even form words, as I did when I was exceptionally tired. She talked to me about the form of prayer called communion. Communion requires no words; it's just about being in, or maybe basking in, God's presence. During this kind of prayer, we simply rest quietly and reach out to God with our heart, mind and spirit. My pastor sent me home with a couple of pages that described this form of prayer. The author of these pages tells a story of a Russian monk who used to go to church each day and just sit and stare at the cross. When someone asked him what he was doing he said, “I look at God and he looks at me, and we are happy.” Communion is about sharing time with God. It's a way of opening up the deepest self, and that kind of opening requires no words, only resting and feeling.

I went home and thought about this kind of resting. It didn't seem right. I was just feeling terribly inadequate. I had grown up thinking that we all have a purpose and part of what we're supposed to do in life is to figure out that purpose. I had thought my purpose was to serve God and

God's people. Spending time just sitting and staring at God like that Russian monk seemed... lazy. And it seemed like I had lost my purpose.

I just couldn't figure out why resting was an acceptable form of prayer, or why it was acceptable at all. And why did I, who wanted so much to be out in the world doing things, have a disease that so completely debilitated me? In turning back to the pages my pastor gave me, I found an answer I could hardly believe and it changed my entire world view. Resting in God is acceptable and is maybe one of the best forms of prayer because God wants to spend time with us. God, in fact, yearns for us. That means that I am worth God's time. Me. Without needing to go out into the world and do good works, without working 60 hours a week, without doing anything at all: I am worth God's time. And so are you.

So whether you are super busy or super not-busy right now, know that rest is not only okay, it is spiritually necessary, because rest allows us to connect with God. So do your best to find that rest—whether it be in the moments between heartbeats, in a Sunday Sabbath, or in hours of every day. Take time to breathe, to sit by silent waters, to rest and renew. And let your cup be filled to overflowing by the love and presence of God. Amen.