

Matthew 11:16–19, 25–30

Jesus asked, “But to what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another, ‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.’ For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon’; the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.”

At that time Jesus said, “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. “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 am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

Rest for the Weary - July 5, 2020

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I imagine the last place many of us were thinking about spending our vacation time was at home. Some of us planned exotic trips to other countries. Some regularly get in the car to visit friends and family. Some, even though we aren't going anywhere far away, at least will go to a park or museum or just grab some breakfast at the local diner.

Six months ago, even three months ago, this pandemic just wasn't on our radar screens. Very few, except some epidemiologists, thought things would be as bad as they are right now. We all thought at the start of this thing that yes, we'd have to spend eight weeks indoors, then we'd be OK again and back to enjoying summer.

Well, it hasn't worked out that way, has it? There are dozens of reasons why, ranging from not following the guidance of public health officials to our general lack of knowledge of the Covid-19 virus, but that really doesn't matter now.

We in New Jersey, at least, have a little bit of freedom to move around and get out of our houses — even do a bit of shopping at the mall. But no dining in, no big events, and in-person worship, even if we choose to have it, would be nothing like before. Other states are not so fortunate. And we can even lose this tiny bit of freedom if we are not vigilant about using our masks and social distancing.

All this is very, very tiring. It is stressful. Despite the precautions we are taking, we are still susceptible to the virus. Furthermore, we all know people, friends, family, co-workers, who have been laid off partially or entirely because of this. So many hopes were dashed this week when the Governor reversed his decision to allow indoor dining in New Jersey. The decision was almost certainly necessary, that doesn't make it easier to take.

All these virus worries are coming on top of the upheaval in our society caused, quite rightly, by the nationwide protests in the wake of the awareness of many white Americans of the centuries of systemic racism inflicted on African-Americans and all people of color. Enough is enough. However, what comes next is very much unknown.

We have a great unknown coming our way this November. To say that the presidential election is and will be stressful, is an understatement. Regardless of who wins, the divisions and hurt in our country will remain for a long time. In a way what's going on is an echo of the divisions in our nation that culminated in the Civil War, with a whole lot more thrown in.

Now you know all these things. I hardly need to tell you or remind you. We have all these concerns to worry about on top of all the other issues in our lives that were taking place before all these things

started. Health issues, relationship issues, work issues, so many things. They're all adding up and individually and collectively: we are weary.

Weary. Not just tired — we get tired simply by living life every day. In fact, we're supposed to get tired. That why we go to sleep! Weary is not exhausted. Exhausted is how we feel when we have put and intense effort into a task, given everything we've got, and are now quite appropriately out of energy. A runner is exhausted after a marathon. A women is exhausted after giving birth.

Weary, however, is another condition entirely. Weariness is really a form of internal emptiness — an ongoing, never fading, sense that nothing is going to change and we can't do anything about it. Tiredness has a cure and that is sleep. Exhaustion has a cure and that is eating properly, relaxing, and moving on.

Weariness is not so simple. So much bad news has come at us in the past few months, news and events well beyond our personal control. Some of us can tolerate uncertainty and conflict better than others. Few of us can put up with what is going on now day after day after week after month — not know when or how it's going to end. I think if I hear the words “new normal” again, I'll scream.

Being weary is a form of hopelessness. It is an emptiness that touches our minds, bodies, and spirits. There are no quick fixes and there does not seem to be a way forward. We find ourselves in a kind of limbo, not knowing what is going to happen or how to prepare for it. We move forward, but truly we aren't sure where we're going.

It reminds me of the Talking Heads song “Road to Nowhere” which begins: Well we know where we're going / But we don't know where we've been / And we know what we're knowing / But we can't say what we've seen / And we're not little children / And we know what we want / And the future is certain / Give us time to work it out / We're on a road to nowhere.

I don't know about you, but sometimes I feel like I'm on a road to nowhere. It all seems so much — too much. Life sometimes can feel like being a boxer, working out in a gym, punching and punching and punching that heavy bag suspended from the ceiling. And it barely moves. And it doesn't not change. And nothing seems to be happening.

Jesus said, “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 am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

In this weary day and age, what can that possibly mean for us? How can Jesus possibly give us rest for our souls. Are we not on road to nowhere? Are we not on the same old, same old pathway with no discernible beginning and no discernible end? What is rest, anyway?

In our weary world, rest is what we want, rest is what we need, rest is what we crave. We need some form of certainty. We need to get off this treadmill of disease and conflict and division. We want desperately want to achieve some sort of day-to-day stability instead of holding our collective breath waiting for the next piece of news.

Jesus offers us rest. But what is Jesus' version of rest? For a world that wants and needs rest so much, is Jesus' version of rest really what we are seeking, or is it just another false road to nowhere?

Let's talk about what Jesus' rest is not. Rest is not simply about stopping and doing nothing forever and ever, we call that death. However, there is no doubt that most of us, including me, should stop and do nothing far more than we actually are. Too many of us are constantly on the move, doing something, anything, rather than just stopping. One of the least-followed of the Ten Commandments must be "Honor the Sabbath Day and keep it Holy." The word Sabbath is related to the Hebrew word for seven, reminding us that God rested, stopped on the seventh day after creating the world. If God can rest, why can't we?

I sometimes fear that we make a deliberate choice not to rest. We want to be active every waking moment. Sleep seems almost like a defeat, an admission that our bodies are not perfect machines that can stop or start at anytime without complaining. But rest is good. Rest is good not only for our bodies, but it is good for our minds and most importantly, our spirits.

We have to rest to let our bodies heal and recharge, but we also have to rest our minds to let them stop worrying and stressing and just plain thinking. I've noticed that when I am stressed and worried, my mind is not my own. It is out of control. All kinds of thoughts flood me. All kinds of weird ideas, usually negative, creep in. Have you ever overloaded or unbalanced a washing machine? Well, an overloaded, unbalanced mind is like that: straining, struggling to turn, and ultimately just shutting down because it can't work. To fix the washing machine, we have to take the laundry out and redistribute it. For our minds to work, we need to take out of our heads whatever is troubling us and put things back in their proper places. Rest helps us reset. Rest helps us put things back in order. But we have to stop. Stop. Just stop. There is no shame in stopping. There is nothing wrong with stepping away from our thoughts and worries and doubts and fears.

How many times have we worried about something only to find there was nothing to worry about? How much better, relaxed, and peaceful we would be if we simply allowed ourselves to rest free of guilt, free of shame?

This worship, this sabbath worship we are doing right now is even more important. This time together is about getting rest for our spirits. More than anything else, we have to rest our spirits, rest our spirits in God. Let me state the obvious: you are not God. I am not God. Only Jesus Christ is God. For that fact we should be thankful, but much, much, much too often we act like we are God and the universe will collapse without us. It's just not true. Now I'm not saying that we aren't useful or necessary. All of us have or have had others relying on us and not doing our duty could hurt or even kill someone. But there is absolutely no way that by ourselves we can help every person who needs help, solve every situation that needs solved, fix every problem or heal every wound. No human being can do that. Even Jesus in his earthly ministry did not cure everyone he met. He was just one very human man.

Rest for our spirits is recognizing our very human limitations while being at peace with them. We have to be willing to admit to ourselves that we can't do everything by ourselves. We can't we just can't. Too many of us view such a confession as a sign of weakness or failure. We keep our bodies, minds, and spirits going nonstop. Yet because we are moving so fast, we are actually doing ourselves and even others more harm than good.

No wonder we are weary! No wonder we are depressed or exhausted or feeling hopeless. We are attempting to do something which we cannot do and that is saving the world in our own flawed, inadequate human way.

I invite you to look in your mirror and say to your reflection: "I am not God. I am a human being and cannot do everything and that's OK." That, friends, is truly where rest begins: a simple admission of who we are — and who we are not.

Do you want to stop being weary? Do you want to get off the seemingly purposeless treadmill of life? Are you looking for a change? Then believe the good news. Jesus Christ is ready, willing and able to take the burden of worry, doubt, and fear off of your shoulders and allow you to place that load on him. Jesus is standing by, wanting and begging you to let him give you rest, real rest.

You don't have to go it alone in life. You don't have to fix every problem and get involved in every issue all by yourself. Take comfort, take joy, take relief that you can hand it all over to Jesus and trust him to show you the way. Trust in Jesus. You do not have to be weary. You can have rest.

I say these words in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.