

“REST FOR THE WEARY”

Matthew 11:27-12:8

Fourth Wednesday in Lent

March 22, 2017

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The gospel lesson comes from *The Gospel According to Matthew*, chapter 11, verse 27 through chapter 12, verse 8. In this gospel lesson, Jesus invites weary and burdened sinners to rest in his finished work. Please stand as you are able for the gospel. From Matthew 11, we begin reading at verse 27.

²⁷ “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. ²⁸ Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

^{12:1} At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the Sabbath. His disciples were hungry, and they began to pluck heads of grain and to eat. ² But when the Pharisees saw it, they said to him, “Look, your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath.” ³ He said to them, “Have you not read what David did when he was hungry, and those who were with him: ⁴ how he entered the house of God and ate the bread of the Presence, which it was not lawful for him to eat nor for those who were with him, but only for the priests? ⁵ Or have you not read in the Law how on the Sabbath the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath and are guiltless? ⁶ I tell you, something greater than the temple is here. ⁷ And if you had known what this means, ‘I desire mercy, and not sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the guiltless. ⁸ For the Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath.”

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.
You may be seated.

Hear again Jesus’ gracious invitation: “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (11:28). Or another translation might say, “All you who are weary and burdened” (NIV).

We carry a variety of different burdens. Some of them are big things. Some of them are little things that just wear on us for so long that we become weary of them. And not all burdens are necessarily bad. Sometimes we like a good challenge, but when we get too much of a challenging thing, it becomes a burden, and we grow weary.

Some burdens are good things that just wear us out sometimes. If you’ve ever had a job, you know exactly what I’m talking about. Gainful employment is a good thing. And you might even think you have the best job in the whole world. But every job can become a burden. I’m a little bit skeptical whenever I hear someone say something like, “I enjoyed every day I got to go to work.” That’s a good attitude to have, but I’m not sure it’s completely honest. Everyone

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wakes up some days and says, “I don’t want to go to work today.” Your own pastor has even uttered those words on Sunday mornings. Even good things can become burdens.

Parents, I suspect your children can become a burden at times. Marriage can become a burden. Singleness can be a burden. Any good thing that becomes a challenge more often than we are ready for a challenge becomes a burden. So we get weary. Even God’s Law becomes a burden, and God’s Law is most certainly good. So it may not be our job’s fault, or our children’s fault, or our spouse’s fault, or anyone else’s fault but our own. The thing that becomes a burden might be totally fine. There may be nothing wrong with it. But there’s something wrong with us. We’re just not strong enough or loving enough. We should be delighted with all these good things. And we should be delighted to do good. But we’re too sinful to enjoy the good things God gives us. And they become burdens.

And if good things can become burdens, then it’s certainly true that bad things can become burdens. Sin is a burden. The guilt of breaking God’s Law ... The pain of hurting someone we love ... These things wear on us, and there comes a point when we just can’t bear it.

Physical sickness can become a burden. Every time I get sick, even if it’s just a cold, there comes a point when I can’t stand it anymore. By about day two or three I get sick and tired of being sick and tired. And I think to myself, *If having a cold bothers me this much, how am I going to handle it when I get something serious?* And I know that many of you have experienced much heavier burdens. And all these physical burdens remind us of a greater burden. They remind us that at some point, some sickness will end in death for us. Death becomes the greatest of all physical burdens.

Mental and emotional pain become burdens as well. Depression is inherently burdensome. Part of the nature of it is that you often feel like you will always feel this way—like there’s no way out. That’s what a burden is—when you either can’t see the light at the end of the tunnel or it’s just so far down there that you don’t want to wait.

Grief can feel the same way. The person who died is dead, and you’re going to spend the rest of your earthly life without them. Things don’t look like they will get better any time soon. Or some sin that was committed against you can’t be undone. You’ve lost something, and you can’t get it back. That’s a burden.

And there are so many different burdens we bear, that I just can’t name them all. So if I didn’t name yours, please forgive me. I could go on and try to name a few more. And then you could all stand up, one by one, and list a few more things that are burdens. And we could go on and on, listing burdens until this sermon itself becomes a burden. That’s just life as sinful creatures in this fallen world.

So whatever burdens you bear, listen to Jesus’ gracious invitation:

“Come to me, all who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” (11:28-30)

Jesus gives rest for the weary.

So let’s take a moment to talk about rest.

Rest is not the same thing as laziness. Laziness is bad. Rest is good. And rest is not simply an absence of work. In fact, rest requires work. I’ll give you a couple examples.

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Suppose you are going camping. Now, camping can be a really restful activity. But it always involves work. You might have to canoe or hike all day to get to your campsite. And when you get to your campsite, you can't just stop working. You can't just collapse on the ground and cease all your labor. You can for a little while, and that feels good, but there is still more work to do to create your restful environment. You have to put your tent up, and build a fire, and maybe do a few other things. And when all your preparations are done, then you have rest. You get to rest in the fruits of your labor, and it feels really good. That's one example of rest.

And sometimes we get to rest in the fruits of someone else's labor. A good example of this might be going to a spa. Now I've never been to a spa, but it looks quite restful. You get to relax while someone else pampers you. There's definitely work going on, but you're not the one doing it. You sit around while someone else prepares a mud bath and puts guacamole on your face. The employees do a lot of work to create a restful environment, and you rest in the fruits of their labor.

So rest always involves work. Sometimes we rest in the fruits of our labor. Other times we rest in the fruits of someone else's labor. But someone always has to create the rest.

And here's the point: Jesus has created rest for you. And he invites you to come and rest in the fruits of his labor.

This is what the biblical concept of the Sabbath is all about. It's all about resting in the fruits of God's labor.

We go back to the very beginning. God created the world and everything in it in six days. Then on the seventh day he rested from his labors. And it was not simply God who rested, but man also rested on the seventh day. This peaceful and stable environment was given to Adam and Eve, and mankind was to have perfect and eternal rest in God's creation. There was still work involved in caring for God's creation (Gen. 2:15), but it wasn't laborious work. Work didn't become difficult until the fall into sin (Gen. 3:17-19). The environment God placed man in was perfectly restful, and it was intended to stay that way forever.

You might notice as you read through the creation account, that at the end of each of the first six days, the text says, "And there was evening and there was morning, the first day" (Gen. 1:5), or "the second day" (Gen. 1:8), all the way up to "the sixth day" (Gen. 1:31). All those days came to an end, and the next day began. But there is no such statement about the seventh day. God simply blessed it and made it holy (Gen. 2:3). There is nothing about the sun going down—nothing about an end to the day of rest. Now, I don't know if this means the sun was supposed to stay up forever, and I don't think that's the point. The point is that the rest God created was intended to be permanent. Man was given eternal rest in the fruits of God's labor.

Now, of course, this rest didn't actually last forever. But God's not the one who took it away. Man threw it away. And when man threw it away, God promised to get it back (Gen. 3:15).

So this whole idea of God giving man rest and then also promising to get it back—this is what all the Old Testament laws concerning the Sabbath are about.

The Old Testament Sabbath laws are always rooted in the work of God. Occasionally they are rooted in God's redemptive work of bringing Israel out of Egypt (*e.g.*, Deut. 5:15), but most often they are rooted in God's work of creation (*e.g.*, Ex. 20:11; 31:17). So God commanded his people to take a day of rest.

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Now this is a gracious and kind commandment. All of God’s commandments are given to us for our benefit, and the Sabbath is a perfect example. For one thing, we need rest. Our bodies and minds simply cannot endure constant labor. So God gives us the gift of rest.

It also reminds us that God is the one who takes care of us. So we take a day of rest, and we discover that the world didn’t fall apart when we stopped working. We get to the end of the day, look back on it, and say, *Huh; I didn’t do any work today, and God took care of me.* The Sabbath reminds us that God provides our daily bread.

The Sabbath also gives us an opportunity to hear and meditate on God’s Word, as well as receive his Holy Supper. This is how we receive rest for our souls on the Sabbath day. And this is important. It saddens me when God’s people neglect this gift. We need to be with God’s people, and we need to receive his gifts together. Now, let’s be clear about this: coming to church is not a work we do in order to make ourselves holy. But we are sanctified in this—that is, we are made holy by coming to church. But here’s the distinction: God is the one who makes us holy. We come to church because this is where God sanctifies us through his Word and Sacraments. This is how he gives rest to weary souls. It is not our work that makes us holy, but his work. And that is why we go to church. The Sabbath provides an opportunity for our souls to rest in God’s Word and Sacraments.

And the Sabbath also looks forward to the restoration of God’s eternal rest. All of the Old Testament Sabbath laws ultimately look forward to Jesus, who comes to give rest to the weary. This is part of what it means when Jesus says, **“The Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath”** (12:8).

So Jesus’ disciples were plucking some grain from a field on the Sabbath day. And it wasn’t stealing. Old Testament Law allowed travelers to pluck some grain from the edge of a field. They weren’t allowed to harvest someone’s field and take the grain, but it was permitted to snack on it as you passed. And the disciples were hungry, so they had a snack.

But some Pharisees saw it and condemned them for it, not as an act of theft, but as a violation of the Sabbath. Old Testament Law forbade harvesting on the Sabbath. That was considered work. But the Pharisees applied this prohibition to any plucking of grain, even if it was just for a snack.

They were missing the whole point of the Sabbath. The purpose of the Sabbath was to lift burdens from workers, not to impose extra burdens. Their interpretation of the Sabbath meant the disciples should just go hungry in that situation. But that just imposes an extra burden. It doesn’t lift anything.

So the Pharisees were missing the point of the Sabbath. They failed to see that it was God’s way of giving rest. And they really missed the point of the Sabbath when they failed to see Jesus as the fulfillment of the Sabbath.

By failing to see Jesus as the Son of God in human flesh who came to give rest to the weary, the Pharisees missed the Sabbath in the worst of ways. They did not recognize that something greater than the temple was standing right in front of them. Their eternal Sabbath rest was right there, talking directly to them, and they didn’t recognize his voice. Jesus is the fulfillment of the Sabbath.

Jesus is the one who lifts every burden and gives rest to every weary sinner. The Sabbath is a reminder that God is going to restore his creation to a state of perfect rest, and he does that in Jesus Christ. So Jesus is the fulfillment of the Sabbath.

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So we talked about the various burdens we bear—our sins, our infirmities, our griefs, even death. Jesus bore those burdens for us. That is why he can say, “Come to me, all who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.” He invites us to come and receive his rest because he has borne our burdens. The prophet Isaiah says, “Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows” (Is. 53:4). And the apostle Peter says, “He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree” (1 Pet. 2:24).

Every burden known to man—Jesus bore them. Sickness, grief, loneliness, hard work, even temptation, even sin, and even death. Jesus bore those burdens, and he bore them for you. He bore those burdens in order to lift them off of you.

Every burden you feel—Jesus has felt that and more. Now the point isn’t simply to say, *Jesus knows how you feel*. He does, and that helps. But the point is to say, *That burden you feel—it’s not even yours; it’s Jesus’ burden*. He bore your burdens.

This is what he did at the cross. He died with your burdens. And those burdens were buried with him. He is your rest.

Now we talked about how rest is not the absence of work. It’s the enjoyment of the fruits of someone’s labor. When Jesus invites us to come and rest, he invites us to rest in the fruit of his labor—specifically in the labors of his cross. It was there on that cross, when he had accomplished the salvation of the world, that he cried, “It is finished” (John 19:30). That is, the work of redemption is complete. The burdens have been borne. Rest has been won. He has accomplished salvation.

And what did he do then? He rested on the Sabbath, as only a dead man can. Just like he did after the creation of the world, when God rested on the seventh day and sanctified it as a holy rest, so the Son of God rested in the tomb on that Sabbath day between Good Friday and Resurrection Sunday. And he sanctified the grave as a holy resting place for his believing saints.

So now he invites us to rest in his finished work, because the burdens have been borne. We may still feel those burdens. We still get sick. We still die. We still feel the guilt over sin. But we know our sins are forgiven, and we know our rest is secure. We have confidence that just as Jesus rose from the dead after his Sabbath in the tomb, so he will also return to raise his believing saints from the dead and take them into his eternal rest. You, dear child of God, will rest forever in Jesus’ finished work.

And this informs how we observe the Sabbath as Christians. We gather on the day of Jesus’ Resurrection to experience a foretaste of our eternal Sabbath rest. We hear his forgiving Word. We feast on the “Salutary Gift” of his body and blood. We receive rest for our souls. And we are reminded that we shall enter that eternal rest.

So Jesus says,

“Come to me, all who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.