

"Getting Some Rest"
Hebrews 4:1-16

October 21, 2018

22nd Sunday after Pentecost

Everybody, it seems, lacks something in their lives. Some may lack money which make it difficult to buy the things which one needs and the things one wants for this life. Some may lack time (or claim to lack time since there are still 24 hours in every day as there has been for millennia) which make it difficult to accomplish all the things one needs to or wants to in life. Some may lack health which makes it difficult to function in life or enjoy life. Some may lack friends, family, or a special someone in their lives which makes living quite a lonely task.

However, there is one thing, it seems, that everyone lacks these days and that is rest. You hear people say all the time, "I'm so tired. I need some rest." Rarely, if ever, do you hear anyone say, "I'm perfectly rested and ready to go." We are constantly searching for ways to rest and be refreshed. Not only do we find it difficult to obtain rest, but sometimes it seems as if we are actively fighting against rest.

For example, people work harder and longer these days than was once predicted. Futurists in the 1960s predicted that, because of the invention of newer and better technology, people would soon be working only three to four hours a week. However, instead of decreasing the work time, companies increase the amount of work required of its workers. If employees didn't like the increased workload, they would be fired and replaced by others who wanted the job.

Children find rest difficult to obtain, too. Instead of just playing, as a means of recreation and rest, children's activities are now regulated and run by adults. I have a newspaper article my files from the 1980s which expressed concern about children being overbooked and burned out. It seems to be getting worse. In my personal opinion, children are overbooked and overscheduled with clubs, athletics and traveling sports teams and like.

One would think that retirement would bring ample opportunities to rest. However, that doesn't even seem to be the case. I can remember my father saying that, after his retirement, he was glad he didn't have to go to work. The reason? He didn't have any time for it because he was so busy. I see the same for my wife in her retirement as she has a new full-time job of going to doctors' appointments.

Even our so-called opportunities for rest are rarely restful. For example, when we take a vacation or a trip of some sort, such vacations can be so structured and planned as to gain maximum enjoyment from them that we return home weary and needing rest. The inside joke with our family was, "We need a vacation from our vacation."

What are we doing to obtain rest? Perhaps not much. We tend to act as if we are prisoners of our schedules and we treat rest as if it were an expensive option, a luxurious choice which we can neither afford or for which we have no time, or something bad because it is so non productive. This is dangerous thinking. Without adequate rest, body, soul, and spirit suffer. Being overworked and under rested can lead to illness, breakdown, or, I suppose, even death.

Where and how do we find rest? We must go to the one who invented rest and who was the first One to rest, namely the Lord. In the second chapter of Genesis, it says that, after completing all of the work in creating the universe (which sounds like a very tiring job), the Lord “rested on the seventh day from all his work that he had done.” The Lord invented rest. Therefore, it is a good thing to be enjoyed and for which one need not feel guilty. It used to be thought that when one wasn’t doing anything, it was bad. The old phrase claimed, “Idle hands are the devil’s workshop.” Rest is a positive thing which even the Lord needed after His work.

God always intended to share His heavenly rest with us, His creatures. He gave the Sabbath day as a weekly reminder of the eternal rest which was to come. But our sin – our disobedience to His commandments – ruined this for all of us. Sin ruined our rest on this earth. By corrupting, not only mankind, but the earth as a whole, it means we have to work harder and have less time to rest. Thorns and thistles were part of the curse of this earth after Adam and Eve’s sin.

Even worse, sin has shut us out from the eternal rest which God always had in mind for us. Therefore, we run as fast as we can on the hamster wheel of our lives, never seeming to get anywhere, but always getting more and more tired. We find no rest.

Jesus Christ came into the world to change that. He came to give us true and lasting rest. Jesus invites us, “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, 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.” (Matthew 11:28-30)

Jesus’ yoke was easy and His burden was light because he entered into this world without the burden of sin, death, and hell which we had. However, Jesus took our burden of sin, guilt, condemnation, and eternal death upon his shoulders. And not only did he take our burden, but He took the sin of the world upon Himself. This sin – all of the bad things which you have done, as well as all of the good things you have failed to do, had locked us out of God’s rest. However, Jesus bore that sin, endured God’s anger against that sin, and suffered the punishment for that sin by His death on the cross. His sacrificial death wipes the slate clean.

Jesus’ resurrection unlocks the door to God’s heavenly rest which He has prepared for us. His resurrection insures our resurrection. Because He lives, you and I shall live as well. And because we live, we shall enjoy God’s eternal rest.

However, there are two problems which get in the way. It is these problems which the author to the Hebrews addresses in our text for today. The first problem is that we may become indifferent over God’s promised rest and take it for granted. In doing that, we may lose out on His rest. The second problem is that we are in need of rest now. We cannot wait for rest some long time in the future.

The author to the Hebrews uses the Exodus account as an illustration for our plight today. The Israelites always thought they would get to the Promised Land, a place of rest, because – well – they were the Israelites. They were God’s people. He had redeemed them. Nothing would ever change that, would it? Our text warns to be afraid “lest any of you should seem to have failed to reach it.”

Simply being a part of a group blessed by God – either the Israelites or the Christian church – does not guarantee entrance into His rest. Just hearing the gospel, being confirmed, and labeling yourself a Christian is not enough. Of the Israelites, God had said, “As I swore in my wrath, they shall not enter my rest.” All who came out of Egypt heard the Gospel but died in the wilderness because of disobedience and unbelief. God is saying that the same thing could happen to the new Israel, the Christian church on earth. Those who who disbelieve the gospel, even though they might speak of it, or disobey God’s Commandments without repentance and faith will not enter the promised rest either.

Yet, there is hope. The final day has not yet come. We are still living in the great “Today”. The gospel is still being preached, forgiveness and faith are still being offered. The Holy Spirit is at work in the hearts and minds of people to bring about sorrow and repentance over sin and to give faith and new life to people, even those within the Church. As our author says, in quoting David, “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.” There is a certain urgency in these words. Do not take for granted this great gift. Do not continue in disobedience and sinful behavior, thinking it doesn’t matter as the Israelites did. Their bodies lay dead in the wilderness and they did not enter the promised stress. God is serious.

What’s the solution? How can we possibly endure or the long and difficult time of traveling in this wilderness called Earth as we move on to the promised rest? Our author writes, “Let us therefore strive to enter that rest so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience.” How could he encourage readers to enter that rest? The rest had not yet come thousands of years ago when this text was written. It has not yet arrived in our time – – or has it?

The truth of the matter is God’s eternal rest has already begun. It has been established by the Word of God which is living and active. The word of God gives life to all people and stops people from falling dead in disobedience and in hardhearted unbelief. It is active which means it’s effective and energizes all creatures. It penetrates to the division of soul and spirit judging the thoughts and intentions of the heart. It judges right from wrong, good from evil, faith from faithlessness. Therefore, gathering around the Word of God is the safest and surest way to be prepared for the rest of God.

This is done in the fellowship of God’s people. Since the establishment of the Sabbath (a word which means rest) day, God has been initiating his heavenly rest here on earth. Continuing with the Christian church here on earth, we already are enjoying God’s rest here and now. The Holy Christian Church in the Divine Service is standing between earth and heaven, time and eternity, this world and the world to come. Although we may assemble at a particular time, day, and place in this world, the Church has access here and now to God’s eternal time and place of rest. By faith we enter God’s heavenly rest here and now, even though we have yet to enter fully into God’s heavenly rest at the end of the world.

What do we assemble for? Many people have the mistaken notion that is to “do” worship. However, Christian worship is primarily a matter of rest. We assemble in God’s presence in order to receive rest from him. In the service, we were rest from all

of our work – the work to make a living for ourselves and to secure our safety, our work to advance our interests and promote ourselves, our work to gain approval from others and from God. We shift from an active state to a receptive state of being. In fact, we rest from our work, so God’s Word can do its work in us. In Luther’s hymn on the 10 Commandments, he explained the 3rd Commandment in this way: “You shall observe the worship day That peace may fill your home and pray, And put aside the work you do, So that God may work in you, Have mercy, Lord!”

The rest that we enjoy as we listen to God and receive his gifts provides us with a foretaste of our heavenly rest. In fact, in the liturgy for Divine Service, the Post Communion prayer, we pray, “Gracious God, our Heavenly Father, You have given us a foretaste of the feast to come the Holy Supper of Your Sons’s body and blood.”

Since we enter God’s rest in the Divine Service by hearing the Gospel and believing its promises and we receive that rest by listening to God’s life-giving Word and letting it do its work in us, any member of the congregation who stops listening and believing the Gospel, like the faithless Israelites in the desert, will forfeit the enjoyment of rest with God, now and for eternity.

So keep on listening to God’s word faithfully and diligently as it is preached and enacted in the Divine service. Our present access to God’s eternal rest depends entirely on that.

Here is rest – true rest for body and soul and the beginning of eternal rest of the same. God the Father created this rest for you and me. God the Son, Jesus Christ bled and died, rose and lives, to give you this rest. God the Holy Spirit, by the living and active Word of God, leads you into this rest to hear the gospel and receive His gifts in the Divine Service. Thus, in the Divine service, God gives rest to us through His living, effective Word, the Word by which he judges and heals us, the Word by which he justifies and sanctifies us, the Word by which he renews and empowers us.

Our opening hymn, O Day of Rest and Gladness, sums it up well in the final two stanzas.

This day, God’s people meeting, His Holy Scripture here;
His living presence greeting, Through bread and wine made near.

We journey on, believing, Renewed with heavenly might,
From grace more grace receiving, On this blessed day of light.

That light our hope sustaining, We walk the pilgrim way,
At length our rest attaining, Our endless Sabbath day.

We sing to Thee our praises, O Father, Spirit; Son
The Church her voice of praises To Thee, blest Three in One.