

Holy Curiosity: God's Rest

May 15, 2022

Bendersville & Wenksville United Methodist Churches

Hebrews 4:1-11

When I was in college, I spent a couple of years, for fun, taking organ lessons.

Now, my university was a small one. And they didn't have the budget for a decent organ on campus for students to practice on. So my organ teacher got permission for me to practice whenever I wanted at a big, beautiful church down the street from campus with an absolutely glorious pipe organ. The name of this church was the Episcopal Church of the Heavenly Rest. Or "heavenly rest," for short.

So one day, I had a group of friends who were all going out to dinner together. Unfortunately, they were going out during what was supposed to be my organ practice time. And so I said to them "I'm sorry, I can't come. I'm going to Heavenly Rest."

And oh, the confused and concerned expressions on their faces. I was talking about going to the church and play the organ. They thought I was talking about going to "be with Jesus," if you get my drift. I think one or two of them were on the verge of dragging me on the spot to go see the school psychologist.

So we are winding through a really fun sermon series titled Holy Curiosity. And during these seven weeks we are exploring different scriptures and topics that people from the congregation have raised.

I say this has been a really fun series so far – and I really mean that. It's also been a challenging one, at least for me. Because in at least some of the cases, there's a good reason that you have asked for a sermon on some of these things...because I've never preached on them, at least not in my three years here. And in a few of these cases, I've never preached on them because...they are hard. Hard topics, hard scriptures, hard messages. Like anybody else, more often than not (and this is my confession here), I can tend to gravitate toward talking about things that are easy and come naturally. The topics that are comfortable for me.

But as a great yoga teacher once said after she had put us in a really hard, uncomfortable yoga pose that she then had us hold for a really long time, "growth and comfort don't know each other." It is sometimes a really good, healthy thing to be stretched into hard, uncomfortable spaces. To wrestle with challenging topics. Because *that* is where spiritual growth is most likely to happen.

So, today's topic is really a fascinating one to me. And it's timely, too. And the scripture is another one that I can honestly say I have never before preached. In fact, after I got

the email requesting this particular passage, I read it and my first thought was "I don't know that I can say I have even *read* this passage before." I mean, I know I have, because I've read the whole book of Hebrews, but for whatever reason...I don't know. Did I read it before my morning coffee had kicked in? Or was my mind wandering off in la la land somewhere like it is so prone to do? Probably. Because there was absolutely nothing about Hebrews chapter 4 that had previously stuck in my memory.

So...if today's scripture is new to you, well...join the club. Because it is new to me too. And if you ever feel a little bit guilty because when you sit down to read your Bible your mind starts wandering to your grocery list, or to that family member that you've been meaning to call, or to that conversation that you wish that you could "do over" again, give yourself some grace. Because you are in good company. Your pastor doesn't always remember what she reads either.

Okay. So, on to today's topic. The topic of "God's Rest." Or, for my college friends...heavenly rest.

We are in the book of Hebrews today, chapter 4. Hebrews is an interesting book, in that we don't know exactly who wrote it, or to whom. Or why. It is a beautifully-written theological masterpiece, with some glorious, powerfully-quotable passages, but in some ways it feels kind of like the Shakespeare of the New Testament. Beautiful, powerful, masterful...but sometimes a little bit hard to understand.

We think that it was probably an "open letter" – not written to one particular church, but to all Jewish Christians, everywhere. And as such, it does not address particular problems facing individual churches, but instead, addresses overarching realities that *all Christians* deal with. And part of the beauty of Hebrews is that if you can get past the flowery language and keep your mind from wandering off into la la land long enough to read and really digest what you are reading, you will likely find that these universal Christian realities that the author writes about are no less applicable to us today than they were for the people to whom he was writing back in the first century.

In our passage today, he is writing to a people who are tired. Like, really *really* tired. By the time Hebrews was written, the Jewish and Christian communities had been facing intense persecution for a long time – for *decades*. Under the tyrannical rule of the evil emperor Nero they had seen their friends and loved ones burned alive, beheaded, strung up on poles throughout Jerusalem. They had gone to war against the Roman government – and that had ended with their temple being seized and destroyed, and all Jerusalem with it. With Jerusalem destroyed, the Jewish people were starting to scatter far and wide, so the community was quickly losing its sense of community – its sense of "place," or of "home." They had kept the faith, and had done so at great personal risk. They had fought the good fight; they had run the race that was set before them; but now, they were getting tired. And starting to really ask the question "how long, O Lord?"

Is any of this ever going to get any easier? Will there ever come a time when we can just let down our guard and *be*?"

And so in response to this overarching sense of fatigue and looming hopelessness, the writer launches into basically a sermon, reminding the people of the ancient Israelites wandering in the wilderness back in the book of Exodus. And he talks about how they, too, were tired – after centuries of slavery. And they longed for a place of rest. A “Promised Land,” if you will. But when God led them to the entrance of that Promised Land, the people allowed their fear to get in the way, and so God allowed them to wander for another 40 years before finally bringing them to a place of rest.

“Don’t be like that,” the writer is pleading with his tired, worn-out community. “God has promised you a place of rest too. A place of rest that is right in front of your noses. Don’t get so stuck in your own “stuff” – your grief and your pain and your fear – that you fail to see and receive this gift for what it is.

And then, the writer launches into a beautiful and complicated conversation about rest. What does “rest” look like? What kind of “rest” does God offer to us?

Well, first-off, rest was a gift given to us in the very beginning. God imbued rest into the very fabric of creation itself. I love looking at it this way – if God created humankind on the sixth day of creation, and then rested on the seventh, then rest is the *very first* thing that we as people ever experienced. Rest is not our reward at the end of a week of hard labor. Rest in God is the foundation upon which the rest of our lives are built.

For us today in American society, we kinda live by the ethos that we get to rest because we have worked hard enough to earn it. But the story of creation tells us just the opposite: we can only work because we have *rested* fully enough.

So rest has been a part of our DNA from our very beginning. But rest isn’t just a command given at creation. It is a promise given for the end of time as well. A promise that no matter what life looks like and how challenging it might sometimes get, we can look ahead to a time when God’s work of redemption is finished; when pain and suffering are ended; when death is defeated once and for all. A kind of total and complete release from the exhaustion and fatigue that we live with for so much of life. In a sense, *this* kind of rest *is* a kind of reward, of sorts. A rest that we receive once we have completed and run with perseverance the race that is set before us.

So we have at the beginning the gift of Sabbath – the gift of rest that we did not work for; we did not earn – we were simply given, as that which will give us strength and fortitude for our journey.

And we have at the end of the journey, rest as another, different kind of gift. The gift of rest from our labors.

Are you starting to get the feeling that maybe God thinks rest is important?

But then, there is a third kind of rest that we don't talk about so much. And this is a kind of God's rest that exists in the middle. It's not the kind of rest that we see talked about in creation, and it's not the kind of rest of heaven that we look with longing toward – it's a kind of rest that exists *right now*, when we find ourselves in “the thick of it” in life. When we find ourselves weary from the journey. When the Jewish Christian community of the first century looks around and realizes just how many of their friends and family they have lost, and they don't know how much longer they will be able to hang on.

When the single mom is working three jobs just to be able to pay the rent and put food on the table, and the school calls to inform her that her child has been suspended and she doesn't have any family in the area and she can't take time off work and the house is a mess and she hasn't done laundry in two weeks and she just doesn't have the emotional bandwidth to deal with this crisis on top of everything else. Because she's exhausted.

Or when the 90-year-old woman who has out-lived her husband and her friends and every single one of her siblings begins showing signs of Alzheimer's. And she knows that her mind is going even though her body is still strong, and the only thing she can say – on repeat – is “Why can't I go yet? Why am I still here?” She's tired. She's done. Her spirit is ready to go, even if her body isn't.

Or the 25-year-old nurse who graduated from college in 2019 and started her nursing career, reared up and ready to care for people and change the world, only to get hit with a pandemic less than a year later. And now, in 2022 with the shortage of health care workers she's getting paid *really well* but she absolutely dreads going to work every day. Because she has been going so hard, for so long, with so little help, and such long hours and now she is just spent. And she's considering leaving her field altogether. Starbucks is always hiring, right?

This third kind of rest that God offers to us is for all of us. All of us who are weary, all of us who are worn out, all of us who are tired. All of us who may or may not do a good job of receiving the gift of Sabbath rest that God offers to us in the beginning, and all of us who have not yet reached that time of final, eternal rest – all of us who are a little bit bedraggled right now.

And this gift manifests itself as a sort of calm assurance in the moment. A reassurance that even in the midst of the storm, we are not alone. That even when our strength fails, God's strength will sustain us. It's the ability that God gives us to take a deep breath, when it feels like we have been holding our breath for goodness knows how long. Or the strength to just do the next right thing, when everything in life feels so confusing and we don't know which way we are headed. It is the conviction that good will win out over

evil in the end, and that God will use even the messes that we bring to the table to accomplish God's perfect work of redemption.

This kind of rest doesn't always feel like rest. Because it's not a nap, it's not a vacation, it's not an invitation to stop doing what we are doing and just "be." What it is, is an invitation to allow God to help us bear the burden. To stop feeling like we have to bear the weight of this life alone. And when we allow ourselves *this* kind of rest in God, that's when we find a certain peace in the midst of the chaos and an endurance that will see us through the exhaustion to the end.

So my friends, as the writer of Hebrews so poetically reminds us: God has led us, along with the ancient Israelites of the Exodus and along with the Jewish Christian community of the second century, to enter into a place of peace and rest. A place where the chaos of the world may still exist – but where God's presence and purpose will give us strength, stamina, and joy for the journey ahead. So may we say "yes" to God. May we allow God to enter into our chaos and clutter, our exhaustion and fatigue, so that we might know the kind of peace and rest that only God can bring.