November 8th: A Season of Rest

My friends, welcome to our fall series, and welcome to a new season.

As we shift even deeper into Fall and closer to Winter, and all that this different phase of our year entails, we know these transitions can have a powerful impact on our spiritual lives and on our souls. Our bodies, minds, and spirits are sensitive to change–and yet change is one of the only constants in our world. So this series is an attempt to offer language, support, and encouragement for those transitions that might be occurring in our lives. As we navigate these moments together, we'll be relying on passages from Old Testament wisdom literature to guide us–these texts, stories, and sayings will hopefully speak to our needs for reassurance and clarity. Wherever you are on your faith journey, we invite you to join this conversation and space for reflection.

To center ourselves and prepare our hearts for today's topic, let's begin with prayer.

God of Rest, from the dawn of creation, you have modeled for us what it looks like to step away and set down our labors. You have shown us the goodness and peace that comes from removing ourselves from work for a time of relaxation. This morning we remember that we are meant for more than endless to do lists, we are your beloveds who were created for this divine pause. Remove any distractions from our minds during this space of reflection, and allow us to sink into this moment with serenity. Help us to listen for your calming voice, we pray. Amen.

When was the last time that you felt truly, deeply rested? I'm going to let you think about it for a minute, because when I asked myself this question, it took me a while to come to an answer.

If you can't remember a moment when you slept well, had a break from responsibilities, or felt at peace, you're probably not alone. Rest is getting

harder and harder to come by in our current culture–it feels like even our time away from paid work is filled with family obligations, endless amounts of administrative tasks, various community needs, and more. Our calendars are full, our schedules are busy, but our hearts are running on empty.

To some extent, this has been a reality since human beings were created–labor in all of its forms has always been part of our reality. We've always had to prepare meals, keep our living spaces clean, and provide for our families. This may look different, depending on which century we're talking about, but we've always had to manage demands on our time that can make us feel worn out and weary.

Here's what part of our Bible has to say about this from an ancient perspective–

When the Israelites are brought out of generations of slavery in Egypt, as told in the Old Testament book of Exodus, God gives them a new commandment: rest is no longer a luxury but a requirement for God's people. Their life of enslavement was hard, but now that they are free, rest will be woven into their daily and weekly rhythms because it reminds of God's protection and provision. Rest is not something they need to earn, but something that is necessary for spiritual flourishing. This practice, called "sabbath," which comes from the Hebrew verb "shabbath," meaning "to stop," becomes part of their tradition of rest. As the Israelites looked back to God's desire to rest on the seventh day of creation–remembering that even our Creator took a break from his labor, rest became an essential act of faith. They celebrated that even God stepped away from his work and called rest good. So one day each week was devoted purely to all forms of rest–sleep, worship, relaxing meals, and peace. This concept of Sabbath completely reoriented Israelite society, it changed their economy, their family life, and their religious practice.

This is certainly inspiring, but it's also true that our modern lives are quite different from these ancient circumstances–we have additional forces and pressures that make rest even more difficult to fit into our lives. In our current

society, driven by the ever increasing demands of unchecked capitalism, I know that it can feel impossible to completely stop for an entire day–our lives are basically engineered to make that choice physically, emotionally, and financially unrealistic. Some of you have responsibilities like raising children–and we all know that children do not operate like clockwork. They need you in the middle of the night. They get sick at the most inopportune times. Some of you are working multiple jobs to make ends meet–sacrificing evenings and weekends so that you can stay housed and fed. You leave one job, just to go to the other, and the cycle repeats. Some of you are bearing burdens of managing a household–cleaning, doing laundry, preparing at least three meals a day for your family. That work does not slow down or stop. Some of you are retired, but still find your days full of doctors appointments–which means that the open calendar that you imagined ends up feeling like a game of medical whack-a-mole. And that certainly doesn't feel restful.

So let's see what wisdom literature has for us on this topic.

This morning we return to the book of Psalms, and the wisdom that these ancient songs can teach us. As I mentioned in one of my October meditations, the Psalms are a collection of humanity's deepest vulnerabilities, they speak to our most real emotions and experiences. They echo the pain and anxieties that are held within our hearts, but they give us language for positive things too–they can show us how to rejoice and to rest in God's promises. Today's passage is another Psalm written by King David, and it is probably the best known psalm in our entire Bible. And that's for a good reason: it has been a comfort to many generations, and it is often memorized by Christians as a refrain to guide us through our lives. So whether you've read it a thousand times, or this is your first time hearing it, I trust that it will speak to you this morning.

Here's the vision of rest that Psalm 23 offers us, verses 1 through 3 begin with these words of hope:

“The LORD is my shepherd, I lack nothing. **2** He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, **3** he refreshes my soul. He guides me along the right paths for his name’s sake.”

Hmm, doesn’t this sound like just what our souls need today? Can we take a moment to close our eyes and just imagine this scene that God is offering us as our gentle shepherd? Can you imagine a moment where you need nothing at all, because all of your needs are taken care of? Can you imagine a peaceful stream surrounded by greenery, with a place for you to sit down and simply be?

Our psalm continues, “Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.” Even when times are tough, these words remind us that God draws close to us to comfort us. God promises us a seat at a table of abundance, to eat and drink of food that will truly satisfy us and rejuvenate us. Can you picture that now? Can you see yourself at this table, with no need to serve others or do the dishes, no task to complete except to enjoy the meal?

This passage concludes with these reassurances: “Surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.”

My friends, if we want to take rest seriously as commanded by God and as shared in our Bible, then God does not want us to wait for these moments and seasons of rest. God doesn’t want us to just look forward to resting in the house of the Lord when we pass away, because rest is meant for us here and now. God’s promise of love and goodness are not carrots to dangle in front of ourselves in order to push through even more of our to do list, they are promises that we must claim each day and each week. Do not keep telling yourself that you’ll rest when you’re dead, because God created you to rest while you’re alive. God designed us for ease and peace today.

So my question for us this morning is this: how are we supposed to do this? How can we find these pockets of time, or carve out a season of rest?

I can't promise that it will be easy, because there are so many forces in our world that profit from us being worn out and tired. I can't promise that it will be simple, because rest might require us to put up boundaries around our time that get disrespected or dismissed by others. And I can't promise that it will always be perfect, because even a Sabbath can be interrupted by emergencies or unexpected life circumstances.

But here's what I'd recommend, and it's what I'm trying to practice as well:

Start small–but stay consistent. Pick a practice that you can do every day or every week, even if it's as tiny as setting aside just 30 minutes. You can always build up from there, but consistently keeping that time for yourself will remind you that this should be woven into your being and held sacred. Pick something that will bring refreshment to your soul and allow you to experience God's protection and care. Pick something that will feel like being by green pastures and quiet waters. Pick something that will feel like a feast for your senses, that asks nothing of you in return. Block your calendar, turn off your phone, whatever you need to do in order to protect that practice.

And in that time, truly rest. Don't feel guilty for stepping away or let your mind focus on all the things you could be doing to be productive. Don't try to multitask or juggle other responsibilities. Resist the urge to plan ahead or mentally catalog all that needs to be done when rest is over. Rest, in its most pure form, is a rebellion against the temptation to determine our worth by what we produce or what we can do for others–so allow yourself to reframe your purpose and identity as centered in God's love and provision. Live into the radical nature of Sabbath, and don't forget that rest is deeply connected to our flourishing. Go back and re-read Psalm 23, and see it as an invitation to be a more healed and whole creation.

Or if you need another source of poetic inspiration, here's one more piece of wisdom that I come back to again and again. It is a poem from the great theologian and author Wendell Berry, who recently passed away after a long career of writing and activism. In many ways, its gentle tone and quiet invitation feel similar to the words and feel of Psalm 23, so I'd like to share it with you–both as a companion for your journey and as an encouragement if you feel like God is leading you into a season of rest.

Here is *The Peace of Wild Things*:

When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

My friends, this is a reminder to reclaim the rest that God has destined you for. Reclaim that sense of peace and joy that is meant for your family. Let the rest that God designed you for hold you in the grace of the world and set you free.

Amen.