

BIBLE READINGS: Psalm 23 Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

SERMON

In a New York Times article this past April, organizational psychologist Adam Grant identified the “dominant emotion of 2021” as “languishing.” He went on to describe this unfortunate state in a variety of ways: a sense of emptiness. Despondency. A lack of hope. Aimlessness and joylessness. The “dulling of delight” and the “dwindling of desire.”

At around the same time, he points out, researchers have noted that roughly sixty percent of Americans are experiencing pandemic-related insomnia right now, despite the gains we’ve made in vaccinating our population, lowering nationwide mortality rates, and resuming some measure of normal life. Unlike America - our vaccination rates are much lower and we now seem to be going back 2 steps for the three we made earlier - though I think the rest of his information suits us! What began over a year ago as a natural flight-or-fight response to a global state of emergency has now morphed into something shapeless and sinister. We’ve lost a sense of balance and rhythm. We can’t get started. We can’t wind down. We’re anxious, sleepless, overstimulated, and bored.

What we need is to find a healthy way to respond to this problem. A way out of our malaise, a way out of our inefficient striving, a way out of our culture’s soul-draining workaholicism. Specifically, a portrait of Jesus we rarely consider. A Jesus who believes in rest.

Often when we read the Gospels, we often see a brisk and efficient Messiah - full of purpose but short on time - striding from village to synagogue to hilltop to seaside, a whirlwind of miracles, parables, and life-changing conversations swirling around him. In fact, it would be easy to mistake Jesus as a sleepless zealot, striving to save the world before his clock runs down.

But a high-strung workaholic is not who emerges in our Gospel reading this week. Instead, we find a Jesus who recognizes, honours, and tends to his own tiredness. We encounter a teacher who pulls his overheated disciples away from their labour and striving. We discover a saviour who probes below the surfaces of our busyness, and pinpoints the hunger our manic culture won’t allow us to name: the hunger for space, reflection, solitude, nourishment, recreation, rest, and sleep.

Is the striving, hurrying Jesus really Jesus at all. Maybe he’s a distorted mirror image of us. Our anxiety. Our perfectionism. Our dread of “wasting” time.

This reading from Mark’s gospel is an odd one, a disjointed cut-and-paste job that brackets Jesus’s feeding of the five thousand to focus on the seemingly less spectacular events that precede and follow it. Mark 6:30-34 describes the return of the disciples from their first ministry tour - their inauguration into apostleship. We see them on fire, bursting with thrilling stories of the healings, exorcisms, and effective evangelistic campaigns they’ve pulled off on their own for the first time. They are wired. Excited. Caffeinated. Ready. In their minds, what they need is their next project from Jesus. Their next divine mission. In their minds, the crowds are waiting, and it’s time to go.

But Jesus disagrees. Where the disciples see energy, Jesus sees overstimulation. Where the disciples see a tightly packed schedule, Jesus sees a poor sense of balance and rhythm. Where the disciples see invincibility, Jesus sees need. The need to debrief and reflect. The need to eat, pray, play, and sleep. The need to learn the art of solitude.

Perhaps Jesus senses that the disciples have darker stories to share with him, too - stories that will take time and tenderness to unearth. Stories of failure and rejection. Stories of doubt. Hard stories they need to process privately with their teacher. Whatever the case, Jesus recognizes that the disciples need a break. They're wired, tired, underfed, and in significant need of rest.

Jesus, meanwhile, is not in top form himself. He has just lost John the Baptist, his beloved cousin and prophet, the one who baptized him and spent a lifetime in the wilderness preparing his way. Worse, Jesus has lost him to murder, a terrifying reminder that God's beloved are not immune to violent, senseless deaths. Maybe Jesus's own end feels closer, and his own vocation seems more ominous. In other words, he has many reasons to feel heartbroken.

"Let's go off by ourselves to a quiet place and rest awhile," he says to his disciples as the crowds throng around them at the edge of the Sea of Galilee. "Come away with me," is how another translation puts it, and I hear both wisdom and love in these words. Jesus wants to provide a time of rest and recuperation for his friends. He wants to make sure that their zeal for ministry - for success in ministry - doesn't become an idol. A drug. He wants to make sure that they value being more than doing.

One of the most insidious social and cultural impacts of the Covid pandemic has been its blurring of the boundaries between home and work, rest and productivity. For some people, this has looked like the transforming of their homes into makeshift daycares, schools, nursing facilities, and professional workspaces all at once — just to meet the multigenerational demands of life under quarantine. For others, it has meant living 24/7 on Zoom, with no clear lines between the digital and the analog, the screen and the self. For others, it has meant losing income or work, or facing eviction, or not being able to visit loved ones shut up in hospitals or nursing homes. No wonder we're languishing. We're not meant to live this way. We're meant to "come away." To honour the rhythms and borders of work and play, inside and outside, online and in-person, sleep and wakefulness. It's not a coincidence that Jesus asks his disciples to leave the noise and crowds behind. Sometimes, we need deep silence. We need to unplug.

Fortunately, we follow a Saviour who is unapologetic about his need for rest and solitude. Who sees no shame in retreating when he and his disciples need a break. Who does so even when the needs around him continue to press in on all sides.

Jesus is able to do this because he trusts God enough to let go. Even as he honours his vocation, and keeps his commitments, he doesn't hoard the limelight, or allow his disciples to imagine that their faith makes them invincible. In the end, the work of the kingdom is God's. We are precious and beloved, yes. But we're not indispensable. God will survive our naps. It is more than okay to rest.

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