

**“IN PRAISE OF REST”**

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Genesis 1:1-2:3

delivered by the Rev. Ryan Lambert

*Third in a series of sermons by great preachers*

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The text for today’s sermon is the third verse of the second chapter of Genesis: “God rested on the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all his work.”

I just know that there’s some mean-spirited person out there who’s already saying to himself/herself: “That fellow is about to take off on vacation, and he’s going to take the text out of context and use it as a pretext to justify his goofing off.” Well, Ms. or Mr. Smartypants, you may not be all that wrong but watch out: theological fireworks are coming your way.

Before we get to them, however, let’s first – in a rapid switch to a more serious mood – sympathize with those here in this church, and elsewhere, who have long been on forced vacations by virtue of having been laid off work. If you are unemployed, the chances are you are having an identity crisis, which is to say you are in the middle of a religious crisis. Please, be like a nail: the harder unemployment hits you, the deeper let it drive you into the everlasting arms of the only one to whom you should accord power to tell you who you are. On welfare or off, with or without unemployment compensation, you are God’s precious daughter or son, and don’t let unemployment tell you differently.

Furthermore, if you are unemployed, chances are you are suffering the effects less of a personal tragedy than of a public scandal, it’s a social, not a personal, failure. God grant that one day this nation will come to its senses and see the right to work and the right to food as the moral rights they clearly are, and then accord them the same legal protection we presently guarantee such rights as freedom of speech, press, and religious.

But that’s a subject whose elaboration awaits another sermon on another sabbath. Our text today calls to remembrance that first sabbath when none of us were around; when God had an entire sabbath to himself, when after six days of prodigious labor, of wild creativity, God took the seventh day off to catch his breath.

Notice that God did not hallow the day on which God made the beasts of the earth, the birds of the air, the fish of the sea, and “every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.” God did not hallow even the day on which she made you and me, “male and female.” No, God hallowed that day and that day only on which God did nothing at all but rest.

There must be more to this business of resting than meets the ordinary eye. This afternoon I’m going to Riverside Park where I love to go because I love to watch the folks rest. It’s the most non-competitive scene in the city. With the exception of purse-snatchers and an occasional mean child, no one is trying to take anything from anybody, and only on a see-saw is someone trying to rise by making somebody else go down. And everybody – those reading on the benches, the dog walkers, the Frisbee players, the lovers strolling down the paths; and the families sitting on the grass or, more often, on colorful blankets – everyone is receiving something, like a renewed

sense of physical and spiritual well-being. It's coming from everywhere, this sense of well-being: from the sky and air, from scudding clouds and singing birds; it's coming from the river and from ice-cream cones, from the sounds of the Riverside carillon and the sight of the Circle Line Ferry on the home stretch of one of the most gorgeous trips a tourist could take any place in this world. But most of all, this sense of well-being is coming from the folks themselves, from each other, *because they have time now* for each other. And it's all free. "Lord, of thy fullness have we received, grace upon grace."

God must have been exhausted by the seventh day, and if God needed to rest, you can count on it, so do we. Our sputtering hearts, our reeling heads, our dragging feet – they all need to rest, and in so doing to receive anew that sense of well-being. If God needed to rest, so do you; it's dangerous theology to think you can improve on God. Yes, there must be something prideful about our reluctance to rest more often. Sometimes I think it's more blessed to receive than to give, at least it takes more humility.

I imagine on that first sabbath God threw a party for himself. He had a lot to celebrate. Read the fifteenth chapter of Luke, as we did in our Bible study earlier this month, and you will find the following: at the end of the parable of the lost sheep, when the sheep was found, the shepherd threw a party; at the end of the parable of the lost coin, when the coin was found, the woman threw a party; and at the end of the parable of the prodigal son, when the son was found, the father threw a party. According to Jesus, God is partying all the time; and once again, it's dangerous theology to try to improve on God.

God rested; God threw a party; I imagine God also took stock. He had a lot to think about, as do we. The other day in the park I passed a person on a bench reading Barbara Tuchman's *Guns of August*. It occurred to me that to go to another place (the park) and to another time (the first decades of our century) was a wonderful way to triangulate on yourself and your own time. "Am I being what I really want to be, doing what I really want to do? Is my church doing all it can to make Christ visible? What more can I do personally about the violence of American life so dreadfully apparent in marginal and expendable people, out of work and on welfare?"

And how fares our relationship with God? Years after the death of Gertrude Stein, her constant companion, Alice Toklas, said of her a wonderful thing: "It wasn't what Gertrude gave me – so much, but it was what she never took away." I often think of God that way: what God gives is no more impressive than what God never takes. Put differently, it's a wonderful thing to be loved by someone who will never be in competition with you; who wants only your exaltation, not his. When you stop to think of it, God is the only person in your life who will never compete with you. That is why it is so restful to be with God, and why God is so readily found in rest. "Be still, and know that I am God." "Come unto me, all ye who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest."

As God will never compete with us, so She will never desert us. Many of you, I imagine, know the hymn, "O love, that wilt not let me go." What you may not know is that it was written by George Matheson, famous Scottish preacher, who in his handsome youth was engaged to a beautiful woman. When the doctors determined that Matheson was going blind, she broke the engagement. It was then, in the depths of grief, that he sat down and poured out:

O Love that wilt not let me go,  
I rest my weary soul in Thee;  
I give Thee back the life I owe,  
That in Thine ocean depths its flow  
May richer, fuller be.

O lovers, never forget that love is greater than the sum of its hearts!

A final purpose of rest seems obvious. While God rested on the seventh day, there is certainly no indication that that was what God had in mind to do for ever and ever. Certainly it wasn't long before rescuing the human race became a full-time job. (God has had a lot of problems, but unemployment has not been one of them.) And saving the human race is our job, too: "The harvest is white but the laborers are few." Success may be far from certain, but where we can't be optimistic we can be persistent. And if, at regular intervals, we rest with God, we can return with God (as St. Paul would say): "to run the straight race, to fight the good fight; to endure unto the end," until with all the saints we are made partakers of God's eternal kingdom.

So get some rest, will you? I'll set you a fine example. God be with you til we meet again.