

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer  
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
7/3/2011, Pentecost 3A  
Zechariah 9:9-12, Romans 7:15-25, Matthew 11:16-30  
Rest for the Weary One

In the Name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My text this morning is the beautiful invitation of our Lord Jesus to the weary one. Jesus beckons us and says this:

<sup>28</sup>Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. <sup>29</sup>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. <sup>30</sup>For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” (Matthew 11:28-30, RSV)

Last Sunday, we discussed “Christian hope.” My theme was that for a Christian, hope means setting the soul in proper order toward the coming kingdom gathered around our Lord Jesus. What can stand in that good kingdom to come? Those are the things worth fighting for. What cannot stand in that good kingdom? Those are the things worth forsaking.

Now, today’s Bible readings incline me toward a sermon on “Christian rest.” As with “rest” in general, so with it is with “Christian rest”: “rest” is not the same thing as lounging around on the sofa. “Rest” is compatible with activity, striving, and resisting. Indeed, when it comes to rest, I think that the heart of the matter is not energy - neither exertion nor ceasing to exert. Energy is not the thing, but rather *location*. Rest has to do with finding the slip stream -- with finding some location within reality such that we are in flow with the resurrection of Jesus rather than fighting against it.

Think of an autumn sky, for example. In your imagination, set aside these lovely early summer days and think ahead to the cool breezes and shorting days of autumn. Winter approaches. Up yonder in the sky you can see a large flock of geese flying south for the winter, all shipshape in their v-formation. I do not know how they choose who is to be the leader of that flock, but there they all are, each one of them in proper place, forming their efficient southward movement. God has granted them wisdom, each one, to find their proper location in life, and in finding that particular location, they have maximized their rest. It is important that they do so, for they have a long flight ahead of them.

Likewise with the school of fish in the sea. If we could see through the green waters of the ocean down to the depths where the fish are, I bet we would find schools of fish moving in harmony, with nary a fish out of formation struggling along against the turbulence of the water, crashing into neighbor fish and upsetting the applecart. No, God has granted a kind of wisdom to the fish of the sea so that they can find their proper location in life, and thereby maximize their rest.

## JEREMIAH 6

If life in this modern world should ever so work its way out that we are left feeling anxious and lacking in self-confidence, consider then a certain line from the prophet Jeremiah. It is a line about the two things of which I am speaking: rest and location. Jeremiah, then, says this:

<sup>16</sup>Thus saith the LORD, Stand ye in the ways, and see, and ask for the *old paths*, where is the good way, and walk therein, and ye shall find *rest* for your souls. (Jeremiah 6:16, KJV)

“... and ask for the old paths.” I believe that true rest for us has something to do with the old paths -- the paths whose Maker is the Ancient of Days, even the triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Imagine a wanderer lost in the woods. Let it be the Alaskan woods. Let it be the kind of environment where the wanderer simply cannot afford to make many mistakes, for night and cold press toward him with all their dangers and hardships. What is this he sees? It is a path in the woods! Maybe it can barely be seen, overgrown as it is on the edges, but there it is. The wanderer, I believe, would do well to follow that path. It might be an old path, maybe the path of Indians from long ago, maybe the path of deer, but whether that path is made by humans or by animals, it is likely to express a kind of wisdom about the lay of the land. It is likely to lead to water. It is likely to avoid cliffs and quicksand. It gives the lost one some hope. If there is no other guidance at hand, that ancient path might still lead him home one day and bring him peace again.

As it is with the wanderer in the woods, so is it for all us children of Adam and Eve wandering on this good old planet of ours: Our rest has much to do with our location in life. It has much to do with the slipstream, with following our true and natural leader through life.

## OUR TRUE AND NATURAL LEADER

Once upon a time, our true and natural Leader knocked an early persecutor of the church to the ground and posed an observation to the man. The early persecutor was a devout Pharisee named Saul. The Lord knocked him to the ground with a great light and spoke to him about the “pricks”: The conversation went like this:

<sup>5</sup>And [Saul] said, Who art thou, Lord? And the Lord said, I am Jesus whom thou persecutest: it is hard for thee to kick against the pricks. (Acts 9:5, KJV)

“It is hard for thee to kick against the κέντρον -- against the *kentron*.” The “pricks” was an iron rod used for goading the oxen or horse along. It was no good to kick against the pricks. Indeed, the poor animal could gauge and injure himself by

kicking against the pricks. Likewise with this persecutor, Saul. It was just no good for him to go on persecuting the early church. Reality just was not on his side. He needed to change his location in life. He needed to forsake persecuting Jesus and fall into line as a follower of Jesus. So do you and I. That is where true rest lies for us in this world.

## REST FROM A TROUBLED CONSCIENCE

For the remainder of this sermon, I want to speak of a particular kind of rest needed in this world. I want to speak of rest from a troubled conscience. For this part of the sermon, I want to discuss St. Paul's great passage in this morning's Epistle Lesson, Romans 7. It is an autobiographical passage, like a peek into the confessional booth, where we hear the great saint pour out his heart with these words:

<sup>15</sup>I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. (Romans 7:15, RSV)

It would take a cool hand to never have to say something like this. It would take a great deal of self-confidence to never have to say, "I do not understand my own actions." The one who can say "I am not troubled like that, I am not puzzled by my own conduct," well, that one is either a pure saint, with no sin to be sorry about, or else a pure fool -- one who *imagines* that he never sins, she never sins, though in fact is a sinner nonetheless.

St. Paul was not such a one. My sanctity will never approach his by a hundredth. Perhaps yours will not either, though by God's grace, we will indeed make progress in becoming more Christ-like as the years pass. Nonetheless, I, for one, doubt that my sanctity will ever approach his, for I have never yet been true to the Lord all the way through the beatings and lashings, persecutions and imprisonments, shipwrecks and heartaches that he went through. But even if I did approach his sanctity, what would be waiting for me at the end but this cry of the saint:

<sup>15</sup>I do not understand my own actions... <sup>24</sup>Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? (Romans 7:15, 24, RSV)

Is there rest for the wretched man? Is there rest for the one who is conscious of sin? Who strives for piety and purity, yet again and again falls back into sin? Is there peace for such a one? Is there a place of rest for such a one?

Imagine that our reading ended with the apostle's agonizing verse 24: "Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?"<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> I got this idea from Spurgeon in his January 23, 1859 sermon "The Fainting Warrior." He was the one who posed for me the simple note of how awful it would be if there were no verse 25 following that painful verse 24.

Imagine that there was no verse 25, no answer to the despairing question. Suppose growth in piety could only bring increasing consciousness of sin, increasing identification with Isaiah's cry from of old:

All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; (Isaiah 53:6, KJV)

Or again, suppose growth in piety could only make us more urgently say Amen! to St. Paul's teaching in Romans 3:

For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God; (Romans 3:23, KJV)

It is a painful thing and an aching time, isn't it, when we realize that, darn it! once again I have fallen into sin! Suppose there were no way forward. Suppose there were no rest for the wretched one. Then wretched indeed would we be!

But there is a verse 25. Here is Paul's question again and then the beginning of that good verse 25:

<sup>24</sup>Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? <sup>25</sup>Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! (Romans 7:24-25a, RSV)

Then the apostle reviews the two principles at war within himself:

<sup>25</sup>Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I of myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin. (Romans 7:25, RSV)

And then he bursts forth into the first verse of his magnificent Romans Chapter 8:

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. (Romans 8:1, RSV)

With this verse, St. Paul speaks of a sweet reality - no condemnation! - and he speaks of a location where we can find that sweet reality: "in Christ Jesus." *There* is where the wretched man can at last find some peace. There the tired one can find some rest. In Christ Jesus there is rest for the weary soul. It is not that henceforth he or she no longer sins. It is simply that in clinging to Jesus, he has at last found the one to whom he can entrust the eternal questions of sin and forgiveness.

And this, in turn, leads to the culmination of this sermon: to the final verses of this morning's Gospel Lesson. Here we read some more about rest for the weary soul:

<sup>28</sup>Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. <sup>29</sup>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. <sup>30</sup>For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

In Jesus and in his ways there is rest for us. Many a repentant sinner can give that good testimony. After too long a stretch following paths apart from Jesus, and in doing too much harm along the way, the repentant one has at last found the slip stream, slipping in behind Jesus, finding direction and refuge in him.

Nestling bird or star in heaven  
Such a refuge ne'er was given.<sup>2</sup>

... as is given to one who rests in Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.

---

<sup>2</sup> LBW 474, “Children of the Heavenly Father.”