

I Will Give You Rest

Hebrews 4:1–16

Dear Friends in Christ.

A story is told of a man who challenged another to an all-day wood chopping contest. The challenger worked very hard, stopping only for a brief lunch break. The other man had a leisurely lunch and took several breaks during the day. At the end of the day, the challenger was surprised and annoyed to find that the other fellow had chopped substantially more wood than he had. "I don't get it," he said. "Every time I checked, you were taking a rest, yet you chopped more wood than I did." "But you didn't notice," said the winning woodsman, "that I was sharpening my ax when I sat down to rest."

Ah rest! We all need rest at some point, don't we. I bet you that right now you would rather be either in bed, or some other place in a state of rest, because, well you need your rest. But you know what, that's what God desires us to do, to rest. It is his design. Right from the get-go, he insisted that we should work six days, but on the seventh to rest. He himself even did it, when he finished his creation, he rested on the on the seventh day. In fact, it is what he offers, an eternal rest with him in Heaven. No, it doesn't mean death, it means to live with him forever, in his presence, that's what he calls rest. It has been his invitation and continues to be his invitation to enter with him in his rest. It is what he is offering, and it is what he has been offering to all generation. Rest! And God's advise is that we take his invitation and offer today.

Today's Epistle reading describes what prevents us from taking that rest he offers. Our continued refusal of that rest. And what makes our refusal is our denial of rest. Edven though we run on fumes, even though we are empty of strength and energy, still we fall into denial.

Such was the story and condition of the Israelites as they found themselves in the wilderness after being free form the Egyptian oppression. After God had brought them out of Egypt to Mount Sinai, he brought them to the Promised Land. But they refused to enter. They didn't trust the Lord and receive the rest he was offering. They didn't believe his promises.

The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews records God's response to this hard-hearted unbelief as he quotes Psalm 95. "Therefore, as the Holy Spirit

says, ‘Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, on the day of testing in the wilderness, where your fathers put me to the test and saw my works for forty years. Therefore, I was provoked with that generation, and said, “They always go astray in their heart; they have not known my ways.” As I swore in my wrath, “They shall not enter my rest” ’ ” (Heb. 3:7–11). Instead of trusting God the children of Israel were frightened by giants and armies in Canaan on the one hand and on the other they were seduced by idolatry, with all its allurements to fornication.

This lesson is painful because we have seen what this same temptation to rebellion has done to someone we know, a loved one perhaps, in our families and in the congregation. Perhaps we are not being persecuted hard and our physical lives being threatened. But there are other forces that when we are tired physically and spiritually, get the best of us. So, our dangers are just as great the Israelites faced in the wilderness.

Sexual sins and violations of marriage are all around us. The deadening power of worldly entertainment and distraction makes us hard-hearted and hard of hearing.

Our schedules, the business of work and even leisure, or the lack of physical rest and the lack of sleep, yes even those things can make us do crazy things, and one of those crazy things is to allow vices distort our lives. O yes, we see that all over from vehicle accidents to the constant abuse of drugs in work fields where long hours are either demanded or offered to workers. O we rest, but not always in the rest God provides and that only compounds the difficulties we face in life.

If we are not careful enough, we will run the same course as the people of Israel in the wilderness. And end up losing eternal rest, the rest Jesus won for us.

But here is the good news, Jesus knows your needs, our need for true rest. And as our High Priest knows and sympathizes with our weaknesses, and because he also was tempted in every way as we are, he knows what it means to be tired, he knows our need for rest, and so he pleads with us not to harden our hearts, instead, hear his call and enter his rest, his eternal rest.

Now the Scriptures tell us that he himself, God, is our place of rest. He is the one who refreshes us, he is the one who relieves our tiredness and our

aching hearts. He is the one who renews us totally for life eternal. Therefore, entering his rest means to have that communion with God, to be with God here and now. To let him be not just to carry us but actually to make us into refreshed and renewed beings. That is his purpose and objective.

That's why he set the seventh day as a day of rest, (Gen 2:2–3), and that's why he set it as a command, as we hear it in the third commandment. And it is not just so we stop working, or just to consecrate a day and do nothing, but rather, to join him here and now, as we enter the rest he provides, and go beyond this temporary place to the promised Land of eternal rest with him.

But how do we join him? We do so through Jesus. Jesus is our rest, that's what Jesus said: "Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." (Mt 11:28). Jesus fulfills God's rest in himself and gives it to us in abundance. This rest he earned with his death on the cross for us. Now, he is offering to those who want to receive it. And the time is now, today.

"Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts" (v 7). Hebrews reminds us. For "This is the day . . . the Lord has made, let us be glad in it." (Ps 118:24). This is the day of rest!

Don't be like the Israelites of Old who, had so many opportunities to enter his rest, but they hardened their hearts instead, they didn't realize the urgency of entering God's rest, and if they did, didn't want to take it seriously.

For the seriousness and the urgency of entering God's rest "today" is bound up with participation in our congregation, because it is here where God begins to provide us his rest. And he does so through binding us to his Word and Sacraments that are being offered here, in this place.

Now, if the invitation to enter Jesus rest is there, and we are tired, laden, then it does make it for an urgency to enter his rest, right? Absolutely. It then becomes urgent to hear God's word, it becomes urgent to receive the Sacraments. It becomes urgent to be baptized because it is the entrance into God's rest. Coming to church every Sunday is urgent since it is the "today" we continue to enter and abide in God's rest. "Today, if you hear his voice . . ."
Reading, studying God's words is urgent, for in there we find life. There is our Sabbath indeed! True rest means just that, to vacate ourselves onto Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith.

Our coming to Church is to get rest indeed! That's why our sacred assembly is filled with great joy. Joy is the permanent and abiding reality of the Christian and the church.

What do we expect every time we gather for worship? Rest! Our Sabbath, and Sabbath means rest. But it is also a time of celebration is a time for celebrating all that God has done for his people. It is a time to hear, it is a time to receive, it is a time to be rested, and that rest begins with the forgiveness of our sins. The freedom that comes with the forgiveness of sins, is the beginning of that rest. Then when you receive his word, you are being strengthened in that rest. When you receive Jesus body and Blood, forgiveness is sealed in you. And so forgiven you have rest! Trust it, receive it.

Our Sabbath, the day of rest is also a time of feasting. In the Old Testament, the gathered people of God feasted together, and at the holy festivals it was on the holy meat of his sacrifices that they feasted. But here we feast on God's Word, that's our food, that's the drink for our souls need, sustaining our faith, nourishing our spirits, and strengthening our hearts. "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Matt. 4:4).

All of that is not confirmed in the ceremonial description of that celebration, but in the giving up of Jesus body which he shares with us at the wedding supper of the Lamb. So we gather to receive Jesus very flesh and blood, with joy and thanksgiving and the peace of the Lord. "But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel" (Heb 12:22–24).

The way to enter God's rest is through his Word. We are to hear this Word eagerly and intently, and we are to believe it and live according to it.

The Teacher of the Hebrews puts it a different way. God is the surgeon and physician of our lives. His scalpel is his Word, which he uses to operate in our stone-hard hearts, our dark and weary souls, and our sin-polluted consciences and minds and wills. That Word is where God his own almighty power. He is the living God, so his words also are living and life-giving. He is omnipotent and active, effective in all he undertakes.

And it is by his Word, that he seats us with him as his sons and daughters in the heavenly places, giving us his own honor in the place of our shame, enjoying eternal rest.

God has given beautiful and exceedingly great promises in Jesus Christ, his Son. We have seen today that he promises to admit us into his eternal rest. But he has warned us not to be like unbelieving Israel in the wilderness, who also had the promise of entering his rest and did not believe it. While we have his Word, let us together hold fast to it, eagerly hear and learn it, and commit it to our hearts and minds, that together we may enter the eternal rest of his joy and celebration and eternal feast. “Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (v 16).

Amen.