

Resting into the Presence of God

July 4, 2021 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

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Texts: Psalm 24:1-10

Will you please pray with me? May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all hearts be acceptable to you, O God, our rock and redeemer. Amen.

We have come to the point in the summer when we lift up our heads from our long “to do” lists, summer camp registrations, final papers, big work projects and that junk room we’ve been trying to organize in between zoom calls and realize, oh it’s the 4th of July! That means it must really be summer. Traditionally summer is associated with a slower way of being, vacations, a break from our regular routines and more daylight hours. With some excitement, we are shifting into a new season together today, the first official summer worship and our first Sunday celebrating communion with people other than worship leaders in the sanctuary.

And yet, I don’t know about you, but it seems that everyone is feeling a bit tired this 4th of July. Physically tired, sure from the heat wave most of the country experienced this week, but also spiritually tired from nature’s ongoing reminder to us that the threat of climate change is here and it’s real, from the stories of violence and hate we see on the news, from the economic and racial injustices we are faced with confronting and amidst it all we are expected today to celebrate our nation’s declaration of independence. While the celebrations for the 4th return with fireworks and parades, we are still feeling tired. Perhaps because so many bad things have been happening for so long. Perhaps because this month marks 17 months of navigating what life is like in this

world with covid. Perhaps because it seems like when one emergency is ending, another issue of figuring out what the transition out of this time will be like is beginning. Or maybe it's all of the above. So today, I'm going to ask us to talk about rest and what it has to do with our faith and our relationship to the work we are called to, the work that is so urgent and needed in our world.

The portion of our sacred scripture we read together this morning is Psalm 24, a song that functioned as a blessing for the entrance to the temple, a blessing to be in the presence of God. There are many intriguing aspects of this Psalm the least of which is this little word included just twice in the first 10 verses, Selah. The word occurs 74 times in the Bible, with 71 of those occurrences happening in the Psalms. Translators aren't quite sure of what this word means but the most common translation has been rest or intermission with some saying it might mean "forever." Perhaps this word is meant to remind us to pause as we read so that we can reflect on the passage as we go, so that we don't get to the end and have to process everything at once? Or it might have been a notation for when these psalms were sung in a liturgical setting. No one really knows. What I do know is that whenever I encounter this word I think about the fact that it was important enough to include a command to stop, to rest even when reading or singing sacred scripture. That rest is a holy endeavor. So holy, in fact, that perhaps it is a way into God's temple, an entrance point into the very presence of God.

And yet, most of us have a complicated relationship with it. I wonder if anyone can relate to when you are sitting on the couch on a Saturday afternoon and that pesky voice in your head says, "I should really be doing something more useful with this time."? I certainly can. We see rest as a thing that is nice to have, a luxury when really it is a necessity. Now more than ever people are experiencing burnout in justice

movements, in their work, in the things that used to bring them joy. Not only because we have always had a complicated relationship with rest culturally, but because we are, as one pastor and writer put it, finishing one marathon and expecting ourselves to sprint into another. This spiritual fatigue from the past year and a half seems to be lingering even as we transition into a new way of being.

An American author, doula, women's rights activist and black feminist based in Detroit, Michigan, Adrienne Maree brown wrote a poem called “My Smile is Tired- Burnt-out Chronicles” and I’d like to share a portion of it with you now. She writes,

*“when people ask me how i am
i want to weep about the end of the species
how cancer is winning, how greed and emptiness are winning
how i wish some nights to be normal, no, to be ignorant, to see no futures in
my dreams
no blood, no guilt, no drought
but then i can’t really swallow
i can’t really catch enough air for all that
i say: fine, a little tired,
exhausted but inspired
overjoyed, emphasis on the over
moving a bit too fast, you know how it is
flip the focus away from me
barreling towards the end of my questions
you can say almost anything with a smile
even if it’s all a blur these days
i’ve been getting by
smiling a light beam cloak over everything
but my smile is tired
all the requests are fair but there’s too many
yesterday i found a circle of women on the verge of tears
we were all the eldest sisters of our houses*

*and we whispered to each other
'i know how to stand up and pull
i know how to push and handle it
i know how to care and attend to
but i never really learned to rest''*

“We know how to stand up and pull, how to push and handle it, to care and attend, but we never really learned to rest.” We never really learned how to rest because our society is set up to keep us constantly on the move. White Supremacy culture demands us to strive for perfection and results that are measurable and verifiable. Capitalism tells us that if it can't be designated as productive or useful then it isn't worth doing at all. We swim in these messages every day and we keep asking ourselves why it's so hard for us to just be when we feel responsible for always looking to the next thing. Instead of framing the act of rest as passive, as something that happens when there is a lack of things to do, I wonder what might happen if we see it as an active practice of our faith. If we might see rest as an act of resistance against the false and harmful narratives of our wider culture that our worth is tied to what we produce.

These beliefs rooted in white supremacy and capitalism around what makes us valuable are very individualistic. If we do our work within a system of relationships, in the context of community then it is not just on us as individuals. When we rest, we can let go for a moment knowing that our sibling in faith can take up the mantle for us until we are ready to dive back in. This approach to justice work reminds me of something that one of the brothers at the monastery down the road said to me when I asked him if he ever gets tired of chanting the psalms during services. He admitted that yes, sometimes he does, but he knows that on the days he feels that way there is always someone there singing next to him who has the energy to bear him along in that part of the worship. Rest requires trust in the strength of the

relationships in the communities we call our own. Rest requires faith in God's abiding presence even when we aren't actively working.

I invite us all in the coming weeks of summer to commit to moments of rest, if not a full day. Whether the state of the world has been weighing heavily on your heart or you've been experiencing personal hardships or a combination of both this past year and a half has been incredibly hard, and we are all human beings who need to recover. How do I do this you might ask? Step outside, close your eyes and feel the warm breeze dance across your face and say thank you to God for the air we breathe. Exchange terrible dad jokes with your middle schooler at dinner. Cut up a whole watermelon, get it nice and cold and eat it out of a big bowl with one fork just for you because you can. Say no to a new project and take a bath instead. Wait to respond to an email and instead dance to your favorite song. Read a book that is just a fun story. Step away from the news for a couple of days. These are just some ideas to get you going.

When we take time to rest, to laugh with friends and family, to paint when we aren't any good at it, to take a nap, to watch a show, to play we are actively communicating to ourselves and to our neighbor that we believe that there is something bigger holding it all for us, our God who makes space for us to see the sacred in taking care of our bodies, minds, and souls. To take regular breaks for rest and for restorative practices is an act of faith and an act of resistance. Perhaps it is a way to celebrate freedom as well. It is a promise to set aside time to be in the presence of God, to enter into God's temple to receive a blessing for the work ahead of us. Thanks be to God we don't have to do that work alone. Selah.

