

Sermon for 4 Easter C
St. John's, Gloucester
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The 4th Sunday of Easter is “Good Shepherd Sunday,” when we hear Psalm 23 and a reading from the Gospel of John about Jesus being the good shepherd. Today is also Mother’s Day, so happy Mother’s Day to those of you who are mothers, or who have mothers. And if this is a difficult day for you, because you have lost your mother, or you never had a good relationship to your mother, remember that Jesus is the good mother that some of us never had.

But what I want to talk about today is rest. The Psalm reads:

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not be in want.
You make me lie down in green pastures and lead me beside still waters.
You revive my soul and guide me along right pathways for your Name's sake.
Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no / evil;
for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.
You spread a table before me in the presence of those who trouble me;
you have anointed my head with oil, and my cup is running over.

The Psalm is often used at funerals to depict the kind of comfort and love we expect when we die. But I want this NOW. Don’t you just long for it? I’m all for lying down in green pastures and being beside still waters, having my soul revived and sitting before a lush banquet to which all the trouble-makers and problems aren’t invited. In the Spanish prayer book, the translation says, your rod and your staff me infunden aliento—they fill me with breath! Your presence allows me to exhale, stop holding my breath in fear, and fill up with the Spirit of calm . . . Right?

Fact is, we’re TIRED! These days, I’m running on fumes and it’s not a pretty sight. I can have a full night’s sleep and still wake up exhausted. My manners in traffic are not lovely. I’m losing track of stuff I’m normally on top of, and I get resentful when one more task crops up. Cause I just don’t have the energy to deal with it.

But I’m nothing special. Pretty much EVERYONE is tired these days. The bishop at Clergy Conference remarked at how burned out clergy are generally, so much so, that a whole bunch have quit or taken early retirement. Medical personnel are leaving work in droves, and there is a shortage of medical workers in hospitals around the country. Parents are stressed to the max; youth and young adults are exhibiting rates of mental health issues. Everyone carries grief and losses from the pandemic. Some suffer from long COVID, which is exhausting. We’re all tired of constant change, economic pressures, messed up relationships, bad news all the time, climate crises and the constant barrage of “whose rights are being taken away this week?” This week, it’s women.

Yeah. We're tired. We all want to lie down in that green pasture and listen to a gentle stream flowing by. We want time out. A global vacation of about 3 months would be great! Good Shepherd, bring it on!

I have been thinking recently about the question of St. John's mission in the world and how hard it is getting just to have enough people to serve on altar guild or vestry or engage with the Grace Center. How do you do something new when you don't even have enough people for the things that are already going on? And I hear talk of "having to get more people in here."

One morning, when I was lying in bed, feeling tired and not eager to get up, I had this thought: Telling people, come to St. John's so you can do all the stuff we're too busy or tired to do, is not going to attract anybody. Because they're tired and busy too!

But what if, instead of inviting people to DO STUFF, we invite people to REST? What if we create spaces and experiences that allow people to have what their bodies and souls most crave? Lying down in green pastures, being beside still waters, feeling safe and relaxed?? Now that's a ministry I could get behind. Or down on the floor with.

There is precedent here and other places. St. John's has a history of providing sung compline, that lovely service that ushers us into night and prepares us for bed. At St. John's in Boulder, I sang in their compline service, which was performed in a dark church. Attendees were invited to bring blankets and pillows and lie down on the pews. Or imagine gathering on Good Harbor beach to listen to the waves and watch the stars come out. Have you ever done yin yoga? You basically lie in various comfortable poses and let your body release tension.

There are lots of ways we and others could help create safe spaces for rest and renewal. Tricia Hersey founded the Nap Ministry in 2016 on the framework that "Rest is Resistance." (Her book, *Rest is Resistance: A Manifesto* is scheduled for release this October.) Her work is based in Black radical thought, womanism, Afrofuturism, and liberation theology. She sees rest as not only a basic need but a racial and social justice issue. She talks about "the grind" that we get sucked into. The Grind is a product of capitalism and white supremacy that value "productivity" over all else. The Grind uses and uses up bodies—especially the bodies of Black and brown persons-- to fuel the economic engine and it leaves people and communities depleted, destroyed. The grind is counter to God's view of life—which delights in creation and relationship and includes Sabbath rest.

To that end, opting out of "the grind" is truly an act of resistance. Lying down and taking care of ourselves places value on our bodies, spirits, and lives that are larger than what we "produce." It's even more radical when we understand how these necessary practices have been systematically denied to so many segments of our society—the poor, the enslaved, migrant workers, immigrants. We need to rest and renew, not only to cope with the current upheavals, but to develop a resilient community that create a new, sustainable, equitable society. Rest IS resistance to the body-, soul- and planet-killing production/consumption-driven society that we have right now. Instead, we need to center and honor all bodies (especially

brown and Black bodies) and nurture relationships, to respect natural rhythms of work and rest, growing and dying. To live with less and share what we have. To understand what “enough” is and seek balance in all things. To rest.

Not that you need it from me, but you’re getting it away: I give you permission to rest. To let things slide for a bit. To focus on your body and soul needs. To do a careful assessment of your abilities and energies and realign your life so you can do what is most important and most life-giving. Even having this ability means we are privileged.

But I also think that in accepting what we can and cannot do, and what we need, we may actually find a ministry and way to connect deeply to the spiritual needs of those around us. I am taking time off at the end of the month because I have to. I am claiming that I need to do it in order to keep being your priest and to be able to be the grandmother I want to be for my daughter’s child. I am also intrigued in the idea of creating places of rest and resistance for others in the community. Maybe some others are as well. Who knows?

I’m not waiting to die to find the Good Shepherd and to live into his promises. What do you think?