

ENTERING GOD'S REST

SERIES: CHRIST BEFORE US

Hebrews 4:1-11

Ninth Message

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The summer break is almost over and, with it, the end of R&R, the end of rest and relaxation. Soon we will all be back to work, whether in the classroom or office, real or virtual, or in some other space doing “real” work with our hands. I juxtaposed work and rest because that is how we usually think of these two words, as opposites. But what is rest? Scientifically speaking, true rest is achieved at absolute zero, where all motion stops. There is no work. But that is not a very appealing state at zero K. We could cite the laws of thermodynamics. But, I’ll let the British comedy duo Flanders and Swann do so in their song, *The First and Second Laws of Thermodynamics*:

Heat is work and work’s a curse
And all the heat in the Universe
Is gonna coool down ’cos it can’t increase
Then there’ll be no more work and there’ll be perfect peace
That’s entropy, man!

Is that what rest is: the end state of the universe when it has run down and lost all energy?

We long for rest, but what actually is it? My idea of rest on a Sunday afternoon after preaching is to cycle up Montebello Road. But that is not for everyone. Rest might be the absence of work, but certain types of work are actually good for us. In Pixar’s movie WALL•E (2008), the residents of the starship Axiom are in an advanced state of rest, but also, as a result, in an advanced state of atrophy. Their rest is doing them no good.

We hunger for R&R, but this means different things to different people. I grew up in rural Thailand during the Vietnam War. On the way to our local train station 50 km away we would pass an air base used by the US Air Force. Outside the gates had grown up a community to cater to the R&R needs of the base. You can imagine... No! Don’t imagine! We called it Sodom and Gomorrah. We would take the train to Bangkok where we stayed at the mission home. Not far away was Patpong, the infamous red-light district that grew up to provide R&R for troops and others from all over east and south-east Asia. But our family would go on to the beach in Hua Hin. Today the beach is lined with large hotels which, to me, looks very unrestful. But when I was young there were no hotels, no large buildings, just endless sand. It was indeed a restful paradise for both children and parents. It was a wonderful place for R&R.

Is that what R&R is: either bars and brothels or sandy beaches?

Here at PBCC our Women’s Ministry has its own R&R events: Relationships and Reflection. Opportunities for spiritual refreshment together.

What is the Biblical concept of rest? Our call to worship was Psalm 23:

**The LORD is my shepherd, I lack nothing.
He makes me lie down in green pastures,
he leads me beside quiet waters,
he refreshes my soul. (Ps 23:1-3a NIV)**

This pastoral image is very appealing, and Psalm 23 is a universally-beloved psalm. In Scotland Psalm 23 from the Scottish metrical Psalter is the most popular hymn.

The Lord’s my shepherd, I’ll not want,
He makes me down to lie;
In pastures green he leadeth me,
The quiet waters by.

We sang it at the graveside as we committed both my parents in turn to the grave. *Requiem aeternam dona eis, Domine*. Rest eternal grant them, O Lord.

Our Scripture reading included these famous words of Jesus:

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.” (Matt 11:28-30)

How we long for rest! For the Shepherd God to refresh our souls. For Jesus the Good Shepherd to replace our burdens with his light burden.

God intends to give his people rest. But will we accept this gift? Three weeks ago, in Hebrews 3 we saw that the Israelites whom Moses led out of Egypt refused to enter the Promised Land. Why? Because their anxious fears would not subside. In response the Lord swore an oath, “They shall never enter my rest.” Israel’s failure was manifold: rebellion, sin, and disobedience. At the root of it all lay unbelief or lack of faithfulness. They failed to complete their journey, and all died in the wilderness. All except for two: Joshua and Caleb, who did have faith and were faithful.

Today we turn to chapter 4, where the major theme continues to be entrance into God’s rest. Our text is Hebrews 4:1-11. Verses 1-2 begin with a *therefore* that anchors us in chapter 3:

Therefore, since the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it. For we also have had the good news proclaimed to us, just as they did; but the message they heard was of no value to them, because they did not share the faith of those who obeyed. (Heb 4:1-2 NIV)

Entering God’s rest: this phrase occurs eight times in just these eleven verses. The promise of entering God’s rest still stands. The rebellion and lack of faithfulness by the wilderness generation did not make God cancel his purpose to bring his people into his rest. That purpose remains, and it is here characterized as a promise.

But the preacher issues another warning, including himself as usual. It is a strong warning, stronger than “let us be careful” (NIV), for he actually says, “Let us *fear* lest any of you be found to have fallen short.” Why does he fear? He is aware of the extreme consequences of failing to finish the journey of faith, of falling short like the wilderness generation due to a loss of faith and faithfulness.

He gives a reason for his fear: “we also have had the good news proclaimed to us.” One could render that “we too have been evangelized.” The dear brothers and sisters to whom he is writing have heard and received the evangel, the gospel, the good news of what God has done in Christ. The risen and exalted Son has entered God’s presence where he has provided purification for sins and sat down at God’s right hand, crowned with glory and honor. This is good news indeed. Why, then, the fear?

The wilderness generation also had the good news proclaimed to them. It was not the gospel about Jesus, but it was good news nonetheless. It was the good news that God was going to liberate his people from harsh slavery in Egypt, bring them to himself, then bring them into the land promised to Abraham, to Isaac, to Jacob. The Lord appeared to Moses at the Burning Bush to commission him. Moses returned to Egypt, where he and Aaron told the Hebrews all God’s words, all his good news: “and [the people] believed. And when they heard that the LORD was concerned about them and had seen their misery, they bowed down and worshiped” (Exod 4:33). But their anxious fears quickly returned and they complained.

On Passover night Moses told them the Lord’s plan to strike the Egyptians but spare his people that very night. More good news. The initial response was the same: “And the people bowed their heads and worshiped” (Exod 12:27). But soon their anxious fears returned. Again and again and again. Moses proclaimed good news from God. But the people quickly turned to grumbling, unbelief, and disobedience. Instead of bowing down to the Lord, they bowed down to a golden calf.

Lest we be too harsh on them, we too are prone to anxious fears that will not subside. As we look around us there is much to make us anxious, fearful, angry, resentful, discouraged, disillusioned, depressed, and on and on.

In the end “the message they heard was of no value to them, because they did not share the faith of those who obeyed” (4:2), where “obeyed” could also be translated “heard.” They heard the good news but they never really heard it; they heard but they didn’t listen; they heard but they never took it to heart. As a result, the good news did them no good. They didn’t trust God whence came this good news. They didn’t consider him trustworthy and reliable, and as a result they themselves were untrustworthy and unreliable.

They did not join the community of faith. Who was in that community? Moses, whom we were twice told was faithful (3:2, 5). Joshua and Caleb, the two faithful spies who assured the people that God would be with them as they entered the land. The community of faith stretched back to include the Patriarchs to whom God promised the Land. It stretched forwards to include Joshua and David. It included all the OT saints who are included in chapter 11, all who lived by faith. But the wilderness generation refused to join this great cloud of witnesses. The community of faith is yet larger. It includes those to whom the preacher has addressed this sermon. And it includes us today. We have joined ourselves to those who have heard by faith. The preacher sees one large community of faith that stretches across both testaments, Old and New.

The preacher knows that his audience has responded better than the wilderness generation:

Now we who have believed enter that rest, just as God has said,

**“So I declared on oath in my anger,
‘They shall never enter my rest.’”**

And yet his works have been finished since the creation of the

world. For somewhere he has spoken about the seventh day in these words: “On the seventh day God rested from all his works.” And again in the passage above he says, “They shall never enter my rest.” (4:3-5)

We who have believed: they had truly heard the good news proclaimed to them and had received it in faith. They had joined the community of faith. As a result they are entering God’s rest. The verb is present and ongoing: they have started to enter that rest, are in the process of entering, but entering is not yet complete. Entering God’s rest encompasses the whole time from initial response of faith through to death or the Lord’s return. It is the entire period of our walk in faith, of our spiritual journey.

In vv. 3b-5 the preacher draws from God’s word in Scripture, but his reasoning is a little hard to follow. First he repeats the quotation from Psalm 95:11, God’s oath that the wilderness generation would never enter *his rest*. But what is God’s rest? The preacher goes far back in time to the beginning. He alludes to Genesis 2:2, that God’s “works have been finished since the creation of the world.” He then quotes that very text, “On the seventh day God rested from all his works.” God has been in his rest ever since he completed creation. The first six days each had an ending: it became evening then it became morning, day *x*. But not the seventh day. This day in which God entered his rest is unending. Finally the preacher returns to Psalm 95:11, God’s oath: “They shall never enter my rest.” God has been in his rest from the seventh day. He invited the Israelites whom he brought out of Egypt to join him in rest, but they refused.

Is the pathway to God’s rest still open? It is:

Therefore since it still remains for some to enter that rest, and since those who formerly had the good news proclaimed to them did not go in because of their disobedience, God again set a certain day, calling it “Today.” This he did when a long time later he spoke through David, as in the passage already quoted:

**“Today, if you hear his voice,
do not harden your hearts.”**

For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken later about another day. (4:6-8)

The promise of entering God’s rest still stands, or remains (1). Now we read that it still remains for some to enter that rest (6). Why does it remain? Because those who were formerly evangelized, who had the good news proclaimed to them, did not enter because of their disobedience flowing from unbelief. But God still wants people in his rest. He is determined to bring people into his rest. Therefore he has appointed a day, *Today*. Again the preacher quotes Psalm 95: 7b-8a, that he had used in chapter 3. Today is the day to hear God’s voice and enter into his rest. Today is the day of invitation—invitation into God’s rest.

David, presumed author of the psalm, wrote this because rest had not yet been achieved. Joshua was unable to bring God’s people into rest, so God appointed another day. That day was open in David’s time.

There was a brief moment when it did seem that entrance into God’s rest was achieved. This was during the reign of David’s son Solomon. The Lord promised David that he would have a son who would be a “man of *rest*” (1 Chr 22:9). He would fulfill David’s desire “to build a house of *rest* for the ark of the covenant of the Lord” (1 Chr 28:2). In his prayer of dedication of the temple Solomon praised God: “Blessed be the LORD who has given *rest* to his people Israel, according to all that he promised” (1 Kgs 8:56).

So, the people were in their resting place, the Promised Land, “everyone under their own vine and under their own fig tree” (1 Kgs 4:25). In their midst, God was in his resting place, as symbolized by the ark of the covenant in the Holy of Holies in the temple. And the king was at rest. Rest was place: the Lord in the temple, the king in the palace, and the people in the Land. God was in the midst of his people, in fulfillment of his promise, “I will be your God, you will be my people, and I will dwell with you.” Rest was the presence of the Lord.

Alas, this did not last long. Solomon’s heart was soon led astray. He stopped hearing God’s word. Eventually the Lord removed his presence from the temple, and removed the people from the Land. What then of God’s rest? Would it be recovered by putting the ark back in the temple and the people back in the land?

Jesus’s invitation to come to himself to find rest is immediately followed by two accounts of what Jesus did on a Sabbath day under the watchful gaze of the Pharisees (Matt 11:28–12:14). In the first account, which we heard, his disciples picked some grain and ate it. In the second, set in a synagogue, a man had his shriveled hand restored. In both cases the Pharisees were upset. Jesus told them, “something greater than the temple is here... the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath” (Matt 12:6, 8). In one fell swoop he transferred both the spatial and the temporal spheres of rest onto himself. He, greater than the temple, was where God was present on earth. He, sovereign over the sabbath, was where and when rest was to be experienced. He placed himself at the center of rest, and invited the weary and the burdened to come to him to find rest as his gift. This was too much for the Pharisees: they “went out and plotted how they might kill Jesus” (Matt 12:14). Today, the day of invitation into rest, was open in the days of Jesus. It was open in Jesus himself. The invitation was now to come to Jesus.

The invitation was open in the days of Hebrews. As the preacher wrote his sermon, the promise of entering God’s rest remained (1). It remained for some to enter into his rest (6). Therefore God spoke about a later day, the day for hearing his voice and entering into his rest. What day is this? *Today!* Today is the day for hearing the greater word which God has spoken in these last days to us by his Son (1:2).

The preacher and his listeners had been evangelized with the good news of Jesus, this greater word. They had heard God’s voice and not hardened their hearts. Today is still Today, the day for hearing the Lord’s voice and responding in faith. The day of taking the first step in entering into God’s rest. The day for coming to Jesus. The invitation remains open for us.

The preacher concludes:

There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; for anyone who enters God’s rest also rests from their works, just as God did from his. (4:9-10)

There are now three things that remain. The promise of entering God’s rest remains (1). It remains for some to enter into that rest (6). Now a third thing remains: a Sabbath-rest for the people of God.

The word *sabbatismos*, translated here and in most English versions as Sabbath-rest, occurs only here and is very rare. It should probably be translated Sabbath-celebration. It is what you do on the day of rest; how you keep, observe, or celebrate the Sabbath. So, it is the celebration life lived in God’s rest. Since God’s rest is unending, it is the unending life of celebration lived in God’s presence.

I’m from Scotland, where the two words *Sabbath* and *celebration* do not belong together. Sabbath, as Sunday is still referred to in var-

ious parts of the country, is a dour, solemn day. Sabbath is kept; it is kept by keeping yourself from doing all sorts of things that are done on other days.—although with the rapid secularization of the country this is quickly changing.

But in Judaism Sabbath *is* a celebration. We see this, for example, in the lighting of the candles at the beginning of the Sabbath meal, as beautifully portrayed in *Fiddler on the Roof*. Some branches of Judaism have long understood Sabbath to be a token of eternity. So Sabbath is enjoyed as a foretaste of the age to come.

Celebration is appropriate because the one entering into God’s rest also rests from his or her works, just as God rested from his works. What are these works? For God it is his works of creation. He continues to be active in the world, but in a state of unending rest. He invites us to enter that rest. When we receive the good news of Jesus we begin our entrance into God’s rest in Christ. But we have not finished that entrance. We are still engaged in our works. These works are not anything we do to try to earn our salvation. That is entirely by grace as we respond in faith to hearing God’s voice, hearing the good news of Jesus that has been proclaimed to us. By grace, through faith, and as gift, we already are God’s people. Our works are the works we do while faithfully following Jesus. They include our own work of following Jesus, and our work of helping others to follow Jesus. For example, Paul praised the Thessalonian Christians for “your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thess 1:3). At the end of our earthly pilgrimage we will enter into God’s presence, into his rest, and the works of our pilgrimage will be complete.

The preacher closes this section with a final exhortation, which, as usual, comes with a warning:

Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will perish by following their example of disobedience. (4:11)

This exhortation and warning forms an *inclusio* with the exhortation and warning in v. 1. They bookend this section.

Making every effort to enter rest seems contradictory. Striving seems opposed to resting. But it is not so when we correctly see the preacher’s view of the Christian life. We have already started entering into rest. But we need to be diligent to keep moving forward in our entering. How do we do so? It is quite simple. The preacher lays out two things to do: follow Jesus, and encourage one another to follow Jesus.

If we keep our gaze on Jesus, looking to him as our example, we will not be led astray by the example of the wilderness generation that responded to God’s voice with unbelief and disobedience.

Repeatedly the preacher urges us to look to Jesus: we see Jesus (2:9), fix your thoughts on Jesus (3:1), fixing our eyes on Jesus (12:2), consider him (12:3). In the hymn *Jesus, I am Resting, Resting*, there’s a lovely line: “Thou hast bid me gaze upon thee, as thy beauty fills my soul.” We gaze on Jesus. But if we take our gaze off of him then we are in danger of drifting away, of coming short, of falling.

One night the disciples were on a boat on the Sea of Galilee during a storm. Just before dawn Jesus came towards them, walking on the water. He bid Peter, “Come.” Peter got out of the boat and started to walk on the water towards Jesus. As long as he looked at Jesus he was fine. But when he saw the wind his anxious fears arose and he was the one who subsided. He began to sink (Matt 14:22-33). Jesus bids us gaze upon him and come to him.

Again this is why I have called this series *Christ Before Us*. The preacher constantly places Christ before us to be the object of our gaze. But also, Christ has gone before us as our pioneer and forerunner. He has faithfully completed his journey and has entered fully into God's rest, into God's presence. From there, at God's side, he bids us come to him.

As we follow Jesus there will be many trials and temptations. Anxious fears will try to arise. But, like Peter, the answer is to look to Jesus. This is part of why we gather on Sundays: to renew and refresh our gaze on Jesus, because our gaze has been pulled elsewhere during the week, because our anxious fears have risen up.

We don't walk this path alone. The preacher urges us to help one another: "encourage one another daily" (3:13), "let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching" (10:24-25). We do this also by gathering on Sunday mornings. We can also do this during the week in connection groups. Later this month there will be two Connection Sundays where we can learn about such groups where we can gather to encourage one another.

The preacher is confident, despite all his warnings, that if his dear brothers and sisters keep paying attention to Jesus and keep encouraging one another they will successfully complete the journey and will enter fully into God's rest.

It is popular to say that we rest in the finished work of Christ. It is true that he cried out on the cross, "It is finished!" (John 19:30). But in the theology of Hebrews, Christ's work is not finished. As our great high priest he exercises an ongoing ministry on our behalf. He is able to help us in our trials and weaknesses. We do go through trials and weaknesses. We bring to him all our anxious fears that they may subside under his loving gaze.

Just a few verses later the preacher is going to say this:

Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need. (4:14-16)

During our earthly pilgrimage our rest comes not from never having anxious fears, never being in a time of need, but from looking to Jesus. We do not yet have access physically to God's presence. That lies at the end of our journey of faith, when we shall fully enter into God's rest, into his presence. But meanwhile we do have access to his presence through Jesus the Son of God, our great high priest who has

fully entered into God's rest and presence. We are his and he knows us. Through him we receive mercy and find grace, because we continue to be in a time of need. We are in need of bidding our anxious fears subside.

Given these warnings throughout Hebrews, wherein then lies our assurance of salvation? My assurance comes not from the fact that I have begun the journey, that I have started to enter into God's rest. The Hebrews in Egypt started out well, bowing down and worshipping the Lord in response to the good news proclaimed by Moses. But it didn't last; they didn't complete the journey. My assurance comes not from looking backwards, but from looking forwards and upwards. My assurance comes from looking to the one who has already completed the journey into God's rest: Jesus Christ, my faithful high priest, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. My own history is too weak to give me assurance. But through Jesus I approach God's throne of grace with confidence, there to receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need throughout the days of my earthly pilgrimage. He is my assurance, not me.

At the end of chapter 12 we will be given a brief glimpse of the end of our pilgrimage:

But you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the Judge of all, to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. (12:22-24)

The myriad angels are already in joyful assembly. We will join them for there remains a *sabbatismos*, a celebratory life lived in God's rest.

I close with a prayer of John Henry Newman:

O Lord, support us all the day long of this troublous life, until the shadows lengthen and the evening comes, the busy world is hushed, the fever of life is over, and our work is done; then Lord, in thy mercy, grant us safe lodging, a holy rest, and peace at the last, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

To him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy— 25 to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen. (Jude 24-25)

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