

## Give Me a Break

Rev. Peter Gomes said he hoped that when he came to the conclusion of his sermon, congregation members would experience one of two benefits: either they would have gained something of value from his message or they would awake refreshed.

He is the only pastor I ever heard suggest that sleeping through a sermon might not necessarily be a bad thing. Not that I'm promoting this idea. But I know how it goes. I have fallen asleep at concerts and lectures and movies for which I paid good money, and had a definite interest.

Sometimes we just need rest so badly that no matter how hard we resist, sitting in a quiet, temperature-controlled environment ushers us into dreamland. And there are times when that rest is exactly what we need.

Today's Gospel reading explores the issue of rest and refreshment. It begins by contrasting the preaching styles of John the Baptist and Jesus.

John the Baptist was in the mode of Jeremiah, about whom we heard two weeks ago. He was a social outcast, marching to the beat of his own drum out in the wilderness. He did not eat what normal people eat. He did not drink, he did not party or celebrate.

His message was urgent, direct, and ominous. *"You brood of vipers! His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear the threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire. Repent you sinner!"*

Jesus, on the other hand was kind, compassionate, approachable. He mixed easily with all kinds of people. He rejoiced with them when they rejoiced and wept with them when they wept. He loved children, healed the sick, and uplifted the poor.

Yes, some of Jesus's teachings could be pretty severe, as we also saw two weeks ago. That stuff about bringing not peace but a sword. But those things were not the core of his message.

The heart of Jesus' message was not deprivation, austerity, and punishment, but love, compassion, forgiveness, abundant life.

John and Jesus had very different styles and often delivered very different messages. At the start of our Gospel, Jesus noted that, for many people, it doesn't seem to matter how you proclaim God's Word. They are going to pick at you and find fault no matter what you do.

*"John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, "He has a demon." The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, "Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners."*

*"How do you get people to listen?"* Jesus wondered. His frustration caused him to go into John the Baptist mode with a *"Woe to you people who refuse to get your act together"* speech.

But then he ends this whole section of challenging statements with these words of immense comfort that we introduced last week:

*Come to me all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. 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.*

This pattern is found throughout the whole Bible, from the Torah to the prophets to the Gospels, to Revelation. Grim warnings followed by gentle promises. Tough challenges mixed in with words of comfort and hope.

It can sometimes be confusing as we constantly lurch from one extreme to the other. But as one of my seminary professors stressed, "When warnings produce change and promises bring hope, then the Word of God is doing exactly what God intends it to do."

That explains the dynamic between John the Baptist and Jesus. Taken together, their words steer us down the path to loving the Lord our God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength, and our neighbor as ourselves.

For most of us the rest that Jesus promises sounds better than the to-do lists of Jeremiah and John the Baptist. I have heard people say they come to church to hear positive words of comfort. They would just as soon not deal with those passages of challenge and warning.

On the other hand, there are churches where the focus is all on the warnings and calls for repentance and shaming people into action. They hold the threat of eternal damnation like a whip; they are not there to coddle those who cannot toe the line.

Both sides have steered themselves into the ditch.

The goal of life is not to rest; the goal is to do something. Yet we cannot get anything done without rest. We need both the promises and the warnings. Calls to action and invitations to rest.

I have a confession to make that may shed some light on this paradox. I sometimes sleep on the job. In fact, I took a 20-minute nap in my office one afternoon during office hours while I was working on this sermon.

I don't do this often, not nearly as often as I would like, simply because I know how it looks. I don't like to be found napping in my office. Doing that opens you up to criticism and ridicule. *We're not paying you to sleep.*

But in a study recently published by *Nature Neuroscience*, researchers tested the work performance levels of workers four times a day. They discovered that performance deteriorated steadily throughout the day, EXCEPT in those subjects who took a short afternoon nap. These people stopped the deterioration and improved their productivity.

Workers in our society are expected to power through their weariness and maintain a high level of productivity until the work day is done. That's part of our valued work ethic.

What research shows, however, is that this attitude is counterproductive—that people get more done and do it better when they take some time to rest and recharge.

This sermon is better than it would have been if I had stayed on the hamster wheel that afternoon instead of napping. But it's also better than it would have been if I had slept all week and slapped it together on a Saturday night.

We constantly walk a line between doing and resting. Parents, for example, have a great deal of experience in steering their children through these twin requirements of work and rest, challenge and comfort.

Part of being a parent is laying down the law. We set rules for children's own safety, and to guide and encourage them to grow into good, wise, and productive members of society.

Those rules must be enforced or they are of no use. Children need instruction and to be reminded of what they have learned. They need to be challenged so they can discover what they are capable of.

But another part of parenting is simply loving your child—providing a safe and caring home, being a refuge in times when they get themselves into trouble, offering encouragement and forgiveness, and second chances. Giving them a chance to rest.

How you relate to children depends on what they need. You don't say to a child who sleeps until noon, and lies around all day playing video games and then spends every evening hanging with friends, "Come to me and I will give you rest."

More rest, if it's even possible, is exactly what they do not need. Nor do you say to a child who exercises no self-control and has just hurt someone, "That's okay. I still love you."

But then, you don't point out to a child who has been devastated by failure or betrayal, how disappointed you are in them for not just shrugging it off. You don't say to a child who is battling double pneumonia—"Keep going; we all have problems."

You don't say to a child who is losing sleep struggling with algebra, "If you weren't so lazy, if you would just work harder, you would understand it."

Warnings are for those who have gotten careless or lazy or so self-absorbed they have lost all perspective. Warnings alert us to the fact that there is a danger, and that without a change, this is going to end badly.

There are times for each of us when we need those warnings. When we need to be prodded into action.

Sometimes I wonder if our standard view of heaven causes us problems because we often make it sound like this is going to be one eternal retirement. Where we will finally be free from the hard work of living.

Where we will have no responsibilities, where life is an endless party, and we will never need to lift a finger again.

I cannot believe, however, that the ultimate goal of life is to reach a point where we have nothing to do. Doing nothing is pretty much what death is all about. Life means doing something. I don't know what heaven has in store for us, but I cannot imagine we're all going to be lounging around in recliners soaking up the sun and sipping martinis.

Life is doing something, so I expect we're going to have plenty of wonderful things to do.

Which leads me to ask a very strange question: will there be any need for rest in heaven? Rest is for those who have been in the trenches, working so hard that they can no longer be productive without it.

Rest is for those who are struggling under the demands made on them. Rest is for those who have been battling illness and stress. Rest is for people who are so weary straining under the load of oppression or failure or guilt or grief that they can no longer stand.

Those situations are not going to exist in heaven. Revelation 21 says, "God himself will be with them, he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more, mourning and crying and pain will be no more."

In short, will there be anything from which we need to rest?

Okay, enough speculation. Jesus offer of rest is clearly for the here and now. It was aimed specifically at the poor, the powerless, the suffering. Those who can no longer get anything done because they so desperately need a break.

Jesus' word actually are an echoing of Exodus 33:14, where the voice of God says, "My presence will go with you and I will give you rest."

It is the presence of God that gives rest and offers relief from weariness and despair. That presence makes a huge difference. For example, we cannot help but grow weary with all the requests for money that bombard us. There is even a word for this—it's called compassion fatigue.

We struggle under the burden of providing an adequate living for ourselves and our loved ones while being guilted into shelling out money for this cause or that.

Eventually, we reach the point where we just want to say, “Enough, already. I’ve done all that I can do.”

Yet whenever a great disaster strikes—a flood, tornado, tsunami, famine, personal tragedy, genocide and we see our neighbors in agony and despair, we open our pocketbooks without question.

Touched by the urgent need, and spurred on by Jesus’ command to love one another, compassion fatigue goes away as if by magic. Without diminishing our efforts in the least, we somehow find rest even in the midst of doing more.

Jesus did not say that he would remove all burdens; but he did promise that those burdens would become light so that we would be able to bear them. It is the presence of Jesus in our lives that lightens them.

Martin Luther said the goal of a sermon is to afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted. John the Baptist was particularly good at afflicting the comfortable. Jesus, while he could certainly afflict the comfortable, was uniquely adept at comforting the afflicted.

But I don’t see the two goals as equal in importance to the Christian. We acknowledge the need for John the Baptist, for afflicting the comfortable. But we worship the one who comforts the afflicted. Jesus said, “I came to seek and to save the lost. To give a break to the ones who really it.”

That is our mission as well. And if you need to sleep through a sermon to get the rest you need to do your mission well—I wish you pleasant dreams!