

Grace, mercy and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen. Tonight we focus on the Gospel from Mark: *“And he said to them, “Come away by yourselves to a desolate place and rest a while.” For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat.”*

“You give them something to eat.” Oh, to see the expressions on those twelve faces after Jesus uttered those words. Dirty, tired, and careworn faces, red around the eyes from a combination of exhaustion and weeping over their friend John whose execution they just learned of. They paused to survey the thousands of hungry men, women, and children that Jesus was asking them to feed. How could he be serious? Philip responded and we can imagine his sarcasm, “Oh, and I suppose you want us to spend half a year’s wages just so each of these can have one mouthful of bread?” No doubt the rest of the twelve shared Philip’s frustration with the Lord.

The twelve had been hard at work, coming and going among the Galilean villages, preaching, teaching, casting out demons, anointing sick people, and I’m sure shaking the dust off their feet more than a few times in the places where they were not received peacefully. They were so busy they didn’t even have a chance to eat. On top of that, they must have just heard that Herod had John executed. Not only was John a friend but a supporter of Jesus, which meant more persecution was likely to come. It was a lot to process all at once.

Jesus anticipated their need for some down time, so he said, *“Come away by yourselves to a private place and rest for a while.”* That must have sounded heavenly. “YES! Let’s get to the resting right away!” So they hopped into a boat and pushed off into the Sea of Galilee. It must have been so serene out there on the water, nothing to do, nobody to bother them. Maybe even time to take a nap or have lunch.

But the time of relaxation was short-lived. As they looked out towards the shore, they could see people moving in large numbers. They seemed to be watching the boat and following it towards its destination. No sooner had they made landfall than the crowds started gathering. Not only did they recognize Jesus, but now all twelve of them had a reputation for teaching and healing. No wonder thousands came to see them! What must have been going through the apostles’ heads at that moment? “Okay, Jesus said we were going to take the day off, didn’t he? Maybe he’ll tell them all to come back tomorrow.” But that was not to be.

Jesus had compassion on the people – why? He observed something about them: they were like sheep without a shepherd. This echoes the words of Moses, right before he died, he asked the Lord to appoint a new leader for God’s people so they would not be as sheep that have no shepherd. Israel’s leaders were supposed to be her shepherds but the people had not been united under a single shepherd since the days of David and Solomon. They were, in fact, scattered and helpless, with no one to lead them in the true teaching of the Lord. So Jesus picked up the fallen mantle of Moses, David, and the prophets, and taught the people of the coming

kingdom of God, of himself, and of things to come. It went on for hours and the sun began to set. By now, you can imagine the disciples starting to get antsy. They still wanted some alone time to recoup and be with Jesus but he seemed completely unaware of the time. Finally, one of them piped up, “It’s getting late. It’s going to be dark soon and this is a desolate place – there aren’t any homes or eateries nearby – and you know, all these people are going to want to eat supper soon. Might this be a convenient time to end your seminar and send them off to eat? And that way maybe we can eat and have more time to relax?”

Can we relate to the disciples here? Don’t all of us crave rest in our hearts, especially that well-earned rest that comes after a hard day’s work? I don’t know about you but I love it. Now, I love my work. Two years into it now I can honestly say I love being a pastor and I can’t imagine a more rewarding calling in the world but...my favorite part of the day is still the part where I can eat a meal in peace and sit in a comfortable chair and just relax, whether it’s watching a Yankees game, or reading a book, or playing a game, nothing beats resting after being busy all day. Our lives are busy. Even you retired folks, I know you’re still busy. Some of you are busier now than you were when you worked! We all sometimes experience what the apostles experienced when they were constantly bombarded and did not even have leisure to eat. And when we finally do get to stop and eat, it is all the more pleasurable. But we all need rest, even if it is short-lived.

The question for us is, where do we find rest? Are we like sheep without a shepherd? Sometimes we don’t know where to turn for rest. We act like we don’t know who will lead us to green pastures and give relief. When we are stressed we can sometimes substitute sinful things for rest. One way Americans especially do this is to completely deny themselves rest. Workaholism is a common disease and by it we rob ourselves of the simple pleasures of life that God intends – food, drink, good company, and relaxation. Or maybe we look for rest at the bottom of a bottle, or by allowing lustful desires to get the better of us. Like the apostles, we doubt whether Jesus will come through for us and we go astray and look for rest our own way.

How *did* Jesus come through for the apostles? He made the desert place a place of rest and feasting. There is a long and rich Old Testament tradition of God providing nourishment in the wilderness and the prophets foretold that the Messiah would be the one who would feed his people in the wilderness just as God provided the manna in the desert for his people in the days of Moses. Our reading from Jeremiah today is one that points to God shepherding his people – “*Then I will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the countries where I have driven them and I will bring them back to their fold...I will set shepherds over them who will care for them, and they shall fear no more, nor be dismayed, neither shall any be missing, declares the LORD (23:3-4).*” And we’re all familiar with the twenty-third Psalm, which presents the Lord as our shepherd, who makes us lie down in green pastures and who prepares a table before us.

Jesus promised rest and refreshment, and he delivered! “Bring those loaves and fish over here and have people sit down in parties because we are about to feast.” And they sat down on the green green grass - their compassionate shepherd led them to fresh green pastures, where they gathered in groups and they reclined, they relaxed. We don’t know whether the multitudes were aware of the miracle or not. What they knew was how

hours had passed by as they hung on this man's amazing words and now he was feeding them. He fed their souls with heavenly teaching and now he was feeding their bodies too. Now, it was no Thanksgiving dinner. In fact, it was more like the manna that the Israelites ate. Simple bread and fish: a simple meal and yet they were completely satisfied. It wasn't just a bite of bread and a nibble of fish. They all ate as much as they desired and there were leftovers besides! Jesus came through with rest and refreshment. He made that deserted countryside one huge banquet.

This miracle demonstrates the giving nature of our shepherd. He gives his flock everything necessary for this life and the life to come. Ultimately it points to how he would give his very life for the the flock. He not only satisfies our desire for earthly bread and provision but for eternal satisfaction.

In this life, God provides for all of our physical needs, including rest and refreshment. He gives us foretastes of heavenly rest in the midst of our busy schedules. It comes in the form of summer breaks, relaxing weekends, vacations, family gatherings with plenty of food to go around, or even those few minutes where you can sit with your feet up and a refreshing drink in hand, ...these are all just moments spent on the green green grass, just crumbs falling to us from heaven's perfect rest and refreshment.

But Christ also meets our needs for the life to come. This miracle was a preview. This moment of rest in the wilderness was a preview of the heavenly rest to come and this simple meal of bread and fish was a preview of the lavish wedding feast of the Lamb. He has also provided Christians with a preview meal; a meal which is a foretaste of the heavenly feast. The meal that we share here, the feast of Christ's own body and blood mysteriously given to us in bread and wine leaves us completely satisfied. We leave the table with consciences clean, with the assurance that all sin is forgiven, and the promise that we will one day share in an unending period of rest and refreshment. AMEN.

May the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.  
Amen.