



# Westminster Presbyterian Church

The Rev. Dr. Richard Baker -  
September 17, 2017 Sermon

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## Our Promised Rest

Gospel Lesson: Matthew 11:25-30, Epistle Lesson: Hebrews 4 (selected verses)

*Our hearts are restless, God, until they rest in you.*—St. Augustine, *Confessions*

*For what you want, above all things, on a raft, is for everybody to be satisfied, and feel right and kind towards the others.*—Huck Finn, from Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

### **Preface to the Second Scripture Lesson:**

Our New Testament Epistle lesson is from the Letter to the Hebrews. The author of that letter—it's really more of a sermon, a sermon in which the preacher exhorts his listeners to keep their faith in Jesus even in the midst of hardship and uncertainty—anyway, the author has a characteristic way of making his points. He says (in effect): "You want to understand A? Well, A is like B, only much, much greater." So: "You want to understand Jesus? Well, Jesus is like a great high priest, specifically, a great high priest in the order of Melchizedek, only much, much greater." Which is great, as long as you know something of what it means to be a great high priest in the order of Melchizedek—more on that later. But, in Chapter 4, the author of Hebrews introduces a different subject, the subject of rest, a subject we may be more familiar with—or maybe not, more on that later, too. Anyway, in his characteristic way, the author makes his point like this: "You want to understand the rest, the peace, that Jesus promises us? Well, that rest is like the rest that God promised to the the ancient Israelites as they wandered in the wilderness—rest that they would find only upon entering the promised land—only the rest that Jesus promises is even greater." And yet both of those rests reflect, and share in, God's own rest, God's taking a sabbath-rest on the seventh day, after creating all things in six days. So here's what the author of Hebrews is saying: "Keep your faith in Jesus: a sabbath rest still waits for the people of God."

It's an old philosophical conundrum like "which came first: the chicken or the egg? Here it is: Do we work in order to rest or do we rest in order to work? But I'm here to tell you that today, after centuries and centuries of people puzzling over that question, we Americans have finally answered it once and for all: Our answer is this: "Neither—we don't rest."

Oh I know, I know: I exaggerate, but not by much. And it wasn't supposed to be this way, but, then again, the future ain't what it used to be.

The future ain't what it used to be. Do you know how to play? You go back fifty, one hundred, two hundred years ago, and find their predictions of what the future would be like—how we would be living now in the 21st century—to see just how wrong they were. So go back and find a Life Magazine (magazines were before the internet) from say, 1957, with a cover story, Life in the 21st Century, and you'll discover that, by now, we're all flying around with little personal rocket packs strapped on our backs, eating meals of little pills served by robots, and working at most—at most, mind you—twenty hours a week. The real worry expressed back then was: "What are people in the 21st century going to do with all their spare time?" I kid you not.

You can understand the mistake, it's the mistake of straight-line extrapolation. They looked at all the machines, the labor- and time-saving devices, the new technologies—the washing machine, the dishwasher, TV dinners (TV dinners were before microwaves)—that had already been developed by the mid-twentieth century and then they extrapolated in a straight-line: “if this continues at this rate, why, by the 21st century people will only have to work 20 hours a week—at most!” But of course no change is singular: it doesn't occur in isolation from other changes and it produces not one, but many effects, many of them unforeseen. So our new technologies often end up taking more of our time rather than giving more time back to us—consider, say, the smartphone.

So no rest for us—hang on a second, let me put down my smartphone—no rest for the foreseeable future, especially when that future is now, no rest. Except . . . except for for this: “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.”

That “all” includes us. How can Jesus make that promise—make it to us? Doesn't he know how busy we all are?

Before I answer that question, let me fend off a couple of possible misunderstandings.

First, I'm not saying the everyone alike is equally busy. Leisure, like wealth, is unevenly distributed in our communities, our nation, and globally. There are many—the jobless, the lonely, the poor, many of our elderly and many of our young, those in prison, those whose mobility or freedom is limited—these and many others long for fewer empty days, want more to do and less free time.

Second, I'm not saying work is a bad thing—in fact, God gave it to Adam and Eve and gives it to us as a good thing, a blessing. It only becomes burdensome as a result of their sin, and ours. But in and of itself, work's a good thing, a gift. In America, in particular, the American work-ethic, American ingenuity, the can-do spirit, the vision, courage, and tenacity to discover, invent and remake the world—there can be something grand and beautiful about all that—certainly it has produced many grand and beautiful things. This is Dayton, Ohio, after all.

And yet for all that, we Americans, like all human beings, long for rest. Maybe we Americans most of all long for rest. That's why I quoted that great American novel, maybe the greatest and most American of all American novels, Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, on the front of your bulletins. It invokes our longing for rest, at least it does for me.

Huck is speaking about life on the raft, a life that he shares with the runaway slave, Jim, as they float down the Mississippi River together. He describes it this way:

*We caught fish and talked, and we took a swim now and then to keep off sleepiness. It was kind of solemn, drifting down the big, still river, laying on our backs looking up at the stars, and we didn't ever feel like talking loud, and it warn't often that we laughed—only a little kind of a low chuckle. We had mighty good weather as a general thing, and nothing ever happened to us at all—that night, nor the next, nor the next.*

*It's lovely to live on a raft. We had the sky up there, all speckled with stars, and we used to lay on our backs and look up at them, and discuss about whether they was made or only just happened.*

*For what you want, above all things, on a raft, is for everybody to be satisfied, and feel right and kind towards the others.*

That's rest, that's peace. Peace with one another, peace with the world, peace with ourselves, peace with God. And it is lovely. And our American work-ethic, American ingenuity, the can-do spirit has been at its best when it has worked to secure that rest that peace for everybody—for our neighbors both near and far.

But alas! we don't live on a raft, as much as I might like to. And anyway all that was a long time ago. So back to the question: can that rest be ours in our 21st-century world?

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

How can Jesus make that promise—to us? Doesn't he know he busy we are?

He can make that promise because he's Jesus.

He is (according to the Letter to the Hebrews) "the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word."

If Jesus is all and can do all that, he can give us rest, yes, even us, as busy as we are.

But will he? Will he want to? Would he do that for us? Well, you know, he is a high priest in the order of Melchizedek, only much, much greater.

What does *that* mean? It means he intercedes on our behalf, to cleanse us of our sin, so that we can come before God. And our coming before God means that we can have all the good gifts, all the blessings that God intends for us, that God longs to give us and that we so long for. It means that we can rest in God and have God's rest—and it means peace, we can have peace. Because, the rest that Jesus promises us isn't ordinary rest, it isn't just temporarily ceasing from our labors. No, it is a peace, a peace that passes all understanding, a peace that the world cannot give. It is God's Sabbath rest. God works and rests, lives and loves—and so can we.

But as the author of Hebrews reminds us, we need to keep our faith in Jesus and not squander it on other things, in particular our technology.

Because when it comes to rest, our new technologies giveth . . . and our new technologies taketh away. And I'll leave it to you to decide which it does more, although I'll remind you of this: the future ain't what it used to be .

But our Lord . . . our Lord giveth, and our Lord giveth. When it comes to life and peace our Lord giveth . . . and giveth and giveth in more than good measure, abundantly, pressed down, shaken together, running over, pouring out into your laps. There is rest for us—that is our future, and our future is what God promises it will be.

And our future is now. We can—and we do—experience God's Sabbath rest here and now, witness Huck and Jim on the raft, witness Westminster Presbyterian Church, a place for everybody to be satisfied, and feel right and kind towards the others.. And we can—and we should—follow God's pattern of work and rest, life and love, in our lives. One key way to do that is to obey the commandment: remember the Sabbath and keep it holy. But that's not easy these days. It's not something our culture encourages us to do any more. But by the grace of God, it's still possible for us. But by now, you'll recognize that I've run up against the topic of Dr. Walter Brueggemann's talk for our Symposium Sunday. And my purpose up here today is not to give that talk, but only to whet your appetite for it. So let me close with this:

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

That's Jesus. And he is our rest, our life and our love, our peace. He is our Lord and Savior.

Keep your faith in Jesus: a sabbath rest still waits for the people of God.

Thanks be to God. Amen.