

## *“Prescription for a Tired Soul”*

Text: Numbers 11: 10-15; John 4: 1-15

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A colleague of mine resigned from his congregation three months ago. All appearances to the contrary the life of being a pastor had taken its toll on him. When I asked about his decision he said: “I’m just plain tired.” And then after a pause: “No, it’s more than tired. I am absolutely depleted.”

Lord knows he’s not alone. Another friend living a very different life at the top of the insurance industry attests to the same feelings – though he is still there. Last weekend in Lewisburg we ran into some of Pam’s high school friends and one of them said, “Even in this quiet little town life feels awful fast.” And my pastoral listening tells me that a goodly number of you either have felt or are feeling such things, too. In fact, this is a consistent theme among our young families today that Barb and Susan and I all hear about: life is moving at an exhausting pace.

More: there is sustained evidence that we live in a culture of exhaustion.<sup>1</sup> The number of people who are tired to the extent that they can’t get to sleep is increasing. The incidence of people who are *not* taking adequate time away from work for fear of losing their jobs is on the rise. The health-care dollars spent on various means of calming down continues to advance, and, as one person suffering from insomnia cleverly put it: “Exhaustion? Why it’s as old as sleep!”<sup>2</sup>

My sermon today is in empathy to this very present reality. Though time provides only the barest touch in passing, I want to offer five words for any who are weary or exhausted. Each is grounded in the wisdom of scripture. And for any who are *not* feeling such things today, you might consider them as preventive medicine for the good of your soul.

### I

First. Learn to **recognize** the signs in yourself. That sounds so obvious as to wonder why I would need to say it. But here is the tricky truth. Exhaustion puts all of us on a slippery slope. The very first thing that escapes us when we get to tired and weary places is the capacity to see ourselves clearly. And consequently, many of us respond to tiredness or exhaustion by being unaware, by denial, or by simply working harder and pushing farther.

And so as a diagnostic aid to this step of recognition you might make it a practice to ask yourself the question of the Psalmist, “Why are you disquieted within me, O my soul?” . . . and then listen as your life gives response. Though this won’t remove all manner of weariness, it will allow for an earlier rather than later diagnosis. And, as with any malady, early is always better than late.

### II

Second. **Realize** the honorable company that you keep. This opens up a second error in exhausted thinking. So many times people exactly like us get way over the edge of too-much-and-come-crashing-down. And then, adding insult to injury, we make the error of thinking that this happens only to us and that we are completely alone. But that’s so far from being true that it

needs to be dispelled! In fact, tired and wearied fatigue is so universal to the human condition that it would be more accurate to say that you are alone if these *never* happen to you!

Our Gospel lesson for today describes Jesus as weary when he stopped at Jacob's well. Imagine that – Jesus being weary! A millennium before Moses got to a place where he said he couldn't go another step. Elijah came to a day when he said, "I've had enough!" And Henri Nouwen, spiritual mentor of our own time, said this about a year before his untimely death: "Why am I so tired? I wake up with an immense feeling of fatigue. Everything requires enormous effort. My body aches and longs for rest."<sup>3</sup>

### III

Third. **Rest!** Let me say that again in case you missed it! Rest! Because no one can keep going forever. We all know this! And yet, current research on the sleeping patterns of Americans, which is but one measure of rest, indicates that we are increasingly a sleep-deprived people!

Once upon another life I awoke to a surprise. During the night someone had taken a stop sign from its proper place and put it at the end of our driveway – facing the house! I woke up Tim and Karen and gave them the third-degree! They were in high school at the time and it seemed a likely prank. Of course they both avowed no knowledge of it until years later. It quickly drew attention in the neighborhood and made for some interesting conversation and so I left it in place for a few days. And for that brief time I had my very own stop sign to remind me to do just that!

Well, in some manner of spirit we all ought to put one of those where each of us live! And we ought also to keep the words of the Psalm right nearby: "Oh, for the wings of a dove, to fly away and rest!"

### IV

Fourth. Take the opportunity to **reflect** on what you really want your life to be. Sort out the things that you want to be about. Sift through the demands and expectations that are getting to you. Select the ones that mean the most. Separate the wheat from the chaff. All of these "s" words – sort, select, separate, sift – are about the essential spiritual practice of discernment. They are necessary because none of us can do it all, be it all, have it all. And we will be run bare to the bone if we don't get in touch with that.

One of the friends I mentioned earlier talked through tears about his decision to take leave of his work. They were tears that emerged from the depth of his own discerning. He said, "I've taken a look and I don't like what I have become. I'm the only one who can change that. And that's what I need to do."

### V

And then last. **Return** to this important truth. The most debilitating kind of tiredness or fatigue, weariness or exhaustion is of the spiritual sort. Rest, recognition, realization, and reflection can change some of that. But if the deepest part of the malady is spiritual in nature, then so must the remedy be. So return to the wisdom of faith. Return to a renewed understanding of who you are as a child of God. Return to the source of life, who is also, paradoxically, life's destiny, too.

The Psalmist says it so wonderfully: “All my fresh springs shall be in thee.” We need to trust that. And in another place, “As a heart longs for flowing streams, so longs my soul for thee, O God.” Saint John of the Cross spoke with this awareness, too. “My spirit has become dry because it forgets to feed on you.” Or the woman speaking to Jesus at the well, “Sir, where may I get this living water?”

So **recognize** the signs of what is so for you, **realize** the company of others and learn from them, **rest** in the ways that replenish, **reflect** on your life, and **return** to the source who is God, and God alone.

That’s not all that our faith has to say about so important a matter. But it is surely enough for today. And it is offered in the name of the One whose sustenance and love, whose life and lessons, are given that we might have life in fullness and joy and abundance. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> LynNell Hancock and others. “Breaking Point” in Time Magazine, March 6, 1995, pp. 56-61.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Henri J. M. Nouwen. Sabbatical Journey: A Diary of His Final Year. Crossroad, 1998, p. viii.