

### Holy is the Rest We Have Together

When I was serving at St. Luke's, there was this woman named Margaret who I looked up to quite a bit. She was in her eighties, frail and bent over, she walked with a cane. It was clear that she had had a difficult life, but was peaceful and positive, in a way that set her apart, made her holy, like a living saint among us. She was a founding member of the healing prayer team at St. Luke's, which was rather core to their identity; since St. Luke had been a physician, healing prayer was how they made that aspect of his story part of their church's ministry, and healing prayer took place in many of their services. Margaret had retired from the ministry about the time I got there because she was in a lot of pain and it was just hard for her to get around and reliably show up. But whenever she was at a service where we offered prayer and laying on of hands, she would always come up, and without fail, ask for prayers for someone else. It was like it didn't even occur to her to ask for prayers for herself, even given her longtime physical struggles. But I remember once, her coming up, and asking for prayers for a friend who was losing her eyesight, but I knew that earlier that week Margaret had gone to the doctor to get some injections of some type of painkiller because she was in so much distress, so I asked her, "Margaret, can we pray for you too?" She looked up with a smile, like this was a revelation to her, and simply said, "yes, that would be very nice. I'm having a lot of trouble."

I remember asking her husband once what was actually the cause of Margaret's pain and he told me that she had had polio as a small child and it left her with permanent muscle damage. That had never occurred to me as a possibility because I grew up in a world in which that was not a threat. No one much younger than Margaret, and certainly not anyone my age that grew up in this country would ever have contracted polio. It was eradicated in the middle of the last century because a man named Jonas Salk decided that he could not rest until no person, particularly for him, no child, would ever again worry about being crippled, much less killed, by that terrible disease. And he worked tirelessly to develop a vaccine that made the world more like the dream he had for it than the nightmare he had witnessed too many times in the reality of dying children. That's actually how he described his work, the conquest of the hope of his dream over the nightmare that he feared. And he refused to patent his work because the dream of healing was more important to him than the comfort of wealth.

Today's gospel passage reminded me of that story. Jesus is teaching in the synagogue on the Sabbath, proclaiming the gospel, the good news he had come to tell the world. In walks a woman who had been crippled for eighteen years. The woman didn't ask for help. She had been suffering for so long that it probably didn't occur to her. She had learned to live with her impairment, and her pain, with not being able to look up at the sky like other people, not moving quickly anywhere she went, never really resting because her body didn't really relax. She didn't cry out to him, and no one brought her forward, but Jesus sees her from across the room and calls out to her anyway, saying, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment" while walking over and laying his hands on her. He is immediately challenged for it by the leaders of the synagogue because he did the work of healing on the Sabbath day of rest on which it was forbidden. But Jesus couldn't rest until she could rest. His Sabbath could not be holy if he stood in the presence of suffering and did nothing. There would be nothing holy about that for him. He couldn't keep

proclaiming the good news of the gospel if it wasn't even true in that immediate place. I think that is the beautiful thing about this story – how his ability to rest was tied up with her being able to rest also. To put in Salk's terms, he couldn't proclaim the dream of God while staring in the face of a living nightmare and still be at peace with it. She had to be set free from her long imprisonment to the bondage of her own impaired body.

Our text from Isaiah warns us that this is going to be true for those of us who align ourselves with God's vision for the world. Isaiah says, "If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday. The Lord will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail." Do you want your gloom to shine with light? – then you have to feed the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted. Do you want to rest? - then you can't be indifferent to the burdens that others are yoked with. Do you want the parched places of your own soul to be quenched with the grace of God? - then you can't point the finger at others and pretend that they deserve the affliction that besets them, or speak of them as though their suffering is unimportant. True Sabbath rest comes in those moments when the good news of God's dream can be proclaimed in a way that actually seems like it could be a reality to the people present. Then we can rest for a moment in that realized dream together.

So the question this text calls us to ask ourselves is: what disturbs your Sabbath rest? Will your Sabbath day only be holy when there are no more children yoked to machines in sweatshops working away their youth? Will your gloom be like midday only when some loved one who battles the darkness of depression can believe again that joy comes in the morning? Can you only proclaim the fullness of God's dream when you are sure that you are not in the presence of someone suffering the biting hunger of an empty stomach? Who is it for you?

You must not wait for them to cry out to you. They may have been suffering for so long that they have allowed the nightmare to masquerade as reality, and they no longer can cry out for help. Go to them and do what you can to set them free, because your realization of the gospel is connected to them. For your light to rise in the darkness they must be able to see it. That is what these passages remind us, that the gospel is a shared dream of a kingdom that you cannot enter alone.

And as the great poet Langston Hughes told us, We must "Hold fast to dreams, For life without dreams, Is like a bird with a broken wing, That cannot fly." Or for us, it is like a Sabbath on which there is not hope of rest.

Your rest, your ability to live into the dream of God, is bound up with someone else, someone in whose presence you could not stand and still proclaim the good news of the gospel with integrity.

Ask yourself whose affliction can you not abide in your presence and still be at rest, or what would someone need to be set free from so that you can proclaim good news of Jesus with integrity. And then set aside a Sabbath day, a holy time, to help make that freedom a reality, even if only a temporary one, so that you can rest in God's dream together.

May you know God's dream in your own soul, may you rest in it, but never alone, and may the affliction of your nightmares be driven out by God's light so that your gloom rises as the noonday. Amen