

March 28, 2021
Christ the Rock Lutheran Church
Farmington, New Mexico

Sermon Text:

²⁸ Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.” (*Matthew 11:28-30*)

CHRIST IS OUR STRENGTH IN DEPRESSION AND LONELINESS

In the name of our Lord and Savior, brothers and sisters in Christ,

It is one of the strangest missing person cases of all time. In August of 1930, 45-year-old Judge Joseph Crater waved goodbye to friends after an evening meal in a New York restaurant. Then he flagged down a taxi, rode off and was never seen or heard from again. Many possibilities were explored: kidnapping, murder, a possible Mafia involvement – but a solid lead was never found. The only clue into the disappearance of this successful New York Supreme Court judge was a note attached to a check made out to his wife. The check was for a sizeable amount and the note simply read, “I am so very weary. Love, Joe.” Was this simply a note – or something much more, the epitaph of a despairing, suicidal man?

Weariness is tough, and I don’t mean the physical weariness that comes from yard work or the mental weariness that follows a day of hard decisions. No, the weariness that attacked Judge Crater is much worse. It’s the weariness that comes just before one gives up. It’s the totally discouraged out-of-work father; the youth who feels he or she will never fit in; the retiree with time on his hands who no longer feels useful; the husband or wife left alone by the death of a spouse.

Only one man in history has claimed to have an answer for such weariness. He stands before all the Joseph Craters of the world with the same invitation: **“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest”** (v.28).

1. Candidates for help

To a greater or lesser degree we all fit Jesus’ description as those who are weary, burdened. We would like to think that as Christians we don’t have such feelings, that we are always optimistic, looking at the bright side. Not true. The “d” days come, days that are more than “downers;” days when we are disillusioned, discouraged, downcast, when life presses down hard upon us – which is what depressed means. Even some well-known Bible figures wrestled with depression and despair. Listen to these words and see if you can identify who spoke them: **“How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and every day have sorrow in my heart?”** (*Ps.13:2*). Here is the second: **“Cursed be the day I was born! ... Why did I ever come out of the womb to see trouble and sorrow and to end my days in shame?”** (*Jer.20:14,18*). The first was King David and the second the

Prophet Jeremiah. And they were not alone. Perhaps the most detailed case of depression in the Bible, and one which provides the most insight into this kind of weariness, is the record of the Prophet Elijah in 1 Kings, chapter 19.

Elijah, as you probably know, was one of the greatest prophets of the Old Testament. At Mount Carmel Elijah challenged 450 priests of the Phoenician god Baal to a contest to see whose God is real. The Baal worshipers chanted, they danced, they cut themselves to get Baal to answer them. Nothing! Then it was Elijah's turn. He drenched his altar with water until it ran out of the stones, and when he prayed, fire came from the sky and burned up the sacrifice and the altar, stones and all. It was a stunning victory, a clear testimony that Jehovah is God. It wasn't missed by the Israelites. They cried out, ***"The Lord – He is God! The Lord – He is God!"*** (1 Ki.18:39). So, onward and upward! Now there would be a mass revival in Israel. Thousands would return to the Lord led by Elijah, right? Wrong. Before that day was over, Queen Jezebel put a price on Elijah's head and her husband, King Ahab, sent assassins to hunt Elijah down. So Elijah ran south, some 90 miles. Exhausted, he lay down under a broom tree – much like the desert junipers around here – and he groaned, "Lord, let me die."

Fatigued, bone-weary, feeling abandoned, full of self-pity – Elijah could be someone you know – burnt out, ready to collapse under the nearest tree, someone who has given up, who has "had it" with work or school, or home, or marriage, or friends, or church, even with God.

But this is not about "misery loves company." It would do us little good to say, "Others have gone through what you're going through and survived. That's just life." Then we would be no better than those friends who came to counsel Job in all his trials, and he rightly called them, ***"miserable comforters"*** (Job 16:1).

2. The invitation of Jesus

God has a prescription for those times when we feel like Elijah. Here's how the Lord put Elijah back on his feet again: First, God let him run until he couldn't go anymore, until his exhausted body demanded he just put it in park. God gave Elijah that time. You see, the Lord knows we need rest if we are to be effective. Even Jesus needed time away from the crowds, quiet time to pray or just rest. Workaholics need days off. Nonstop homemakers need a vacation. Care-givers need a pause in that demanding routine. Without proper rest and diet you won't be very effective. It's as simple as that. Sometimes that Elijah collapse beneath the broom tree is the Lord's way of telling us, "Enough already!"

When we are depressed or in despair, we tend to turn inward and close others out, including the Lord. Depressed people tend to magnify and feed on their bad feelings. Think of Elijah complaining, ***"I am the only one left"*** (1 Ki.19:10b) – He thought of himself as the only believer

left in all of Israel. It wasn't true, but that's how Elijah felt. And when you focus on the way you feel, the bad feelings will dominate and set up a vicious cycle of self-pity that closes God and everyone else out. Satan loves nothing more than to get us to such a state.

So what did God do? He spoke quietly to Elijah. He had Elijah listen to what He had to say, and not just listen to those feelings that were speaking so loudly and so negatively. God would do the same with us. He whispers to us through gentle words like those in our text: "***Come to me,***" says our Lord, "***and I will give you rest***" (v.28).

You've probably heard it said that God never gives us more than we can handle. However, St. Paul said something quite different. He wrote to the Corinthians, "***We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired of life itself. ... But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead***" (2 Cor.1:8-9). Truth is that God does allow us to be in situations that are too much for us and threaten to overwhelm our strength. He does this not to teach us that we can handle it, but to teach us that He can handle it, to learn again that there isn't anything our God can't handle, including depression and loneliness. His saving power shines the more brightly against the background of our weakness.

And isn't this the very principle God applies to our salvation? Those who depend on their own works, on themselves for salvation will perish. Those who recognize their weakness and call upon Christ for forgiveness and redemption will have everlasting life.

The same principle applies to our lives as Christians. We sometimes feel: "This is something that as a Christian I should be able to do, or I should be able to cope with." And when we can't, or medication is required, we may feel we have failed. We may even question our faith. We get caught in that vicious cycle and begin to look inward when God would have us look to Him, to turn to His strength. In such times, listen to that quiet voice of God whispering to your soul. Turn to Him in His Word.

Finally, in this Elijah prescription, God gave Elijah work to do – because work gives us a sense of purpose and usefulness – and He gave Elijah a companion, a friend by the name of Elisha, so Elijah would no longer be alone. Some of us perhaps could use a friend, someone to run alongside of us, someone to talk to about the load we've been carrying. Supportive friendships lighten our burdens and lift us up when we are down.

The one Friend who is always there, who never leaves us, is Jesus. In His invitation He says, "***I will give you rest***" (v.28). The Greek word for "rest" is *anapausis*, in which is embedded our

English word “pause.” Think of the rest Jesus promises as a pause that refreshes, as relief from the burden you’ve been carrying.

When I read this passage, I remembered a backpack hike I took with a friend who brought his 10-yr. old son along. Although the boy’s pack was small, it wasn’t long before he was crying that it was too heavy. So his Dad lightened it up by taking the son’s sleeping bag and tying it to his own pack. But soon the boy cried that his pack was still too heavy. Again his Dad took items from that pack and added them to his own. This scene was repeated until my friend was carrying his son’s pack in his arms.

That’s what Jesus has done for us. He lifted that backpack filled with our sins, weighed down with the burdens guilt and fear and despair have loaded on us. Jesus took that load and carried it to the cross for us. That’s what it means to have “rest” in Jesus.

When you need the strength to just keep putting one foot in front of the other, when you need someone to push back the gray clouds, when you need to help someone else ward off a case of severe depression, Jesus is that One who shoulders that burden for you. The devil would have you believe, “Nobody cares about me. I am useless, finished.” Don’t you believe that lie. The empty cross and the One who hung on it, the Lord who now reigns over everything, has told us again today, “I care! Come to Me and I will be your strength, for I am always with you, and I will be there for you -- to the end of time and beyond.”

Amen.

Sermon by Pastor Emeritus Ted Lambert