



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
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Sacred Rhythms
Isaiah 40:21-31; Mark 1:35-45

When Spencer was in fourth grade, he had a wonderfully creative and engaging teacher who was also very wise. One day, when the class was getting especially boisterous and she was reaching her limit, his teacher suggested they all go outside and take a walk to calm down. One of the children asked why they were leaving the classroom, and she replied, "Because I need a sabbatical." Another child asked, "What's a sabbatical?" The teacher offered a piece of candy to the student who could find the definition first. Spencer immediately raised his hand and said, "I don't need to look it up. A sabbatical mean a time to rest or take a break." She inquired how he knew this, and he replied, "My mom tells me all the time that she needs a sabbatical for a few minutes. I think it's because of me."

We all need to rest or take a break sometimes, don't we? Maybe our nerves get frayed because they kids are being rowdy; or we grow tired because of our increasingly busy schedules; or we get run down because we develop a pattern of too little sleep, too little exercise, too much junk food, and too many demands. I'm certainly not judging here. I'm mostly confessing. But these habits have become all too common in our over-scheduled, convenience-driven, chaotic lives. We are tired and distracted, and whatever the cause, we all find ourselves in need of taking a break sometimes.

This is not a recent development in the human condition, of course. No sooner had God breathed life into the crowning glory of his creation than he sanctioned a day of rest for them. I suppose God knew we would have a tendency to stretch ourselves too thin. We become convinced of our own self-sufficiency and self-importance. We take on the demands and expectations of others, wanting to please everyone else or convincing ourselves that no one else will be able to do this or accomplish that quite as well as we can. Or we keep moving and keep busy so that we won't have to think too much or feel too much, perhaps afraid of what we might find inside our own heads and hearts. Whatever the cause, we can go for weeks, months, even years, never slowing down, never pushing the pause button on our frantic lives. So in his infinite love and wisdom, God didn't just recommend that we take a break

from time to time; he commanded a Sabbath, a holy day for all of us to rest and to commune with him, not only time for us to rest our weary bodies but also, and perhaps more importantly, a time for us to reorient our focus and reacquaint our spirits with our Creator.

In last Sunday night's presentation, Dr. Luke Powery shared in a powerful way the importance of this kind of reorientation, of attending to our spirits in order to prepare an inward sanctuary for God's Spirit to dwell. I was especially pleased that Dr. Powery used the words of Howard Thurman to ground the thoughts he shared with us. Named one of the greatest preachers of the 20th century, Dr. Thurman was a spiritual advisor to civil rights leaders, the first black dean at a white university, cofounder of the first interracial pastored church in the U.S., and an accomplished poet, preacher, philosopher, and educator. Among his prolific writings, he offered many inspiring meditations on Scripture, words that invite us to "center down," as he calls it, to contemplate the depths of truth and inspiration in God's word.

In his book, *Meditations of the Heart*, Dr. Thurman considers the phrase from today's Isaiah passage, "Those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength" (Isaiah 40:31a). This kind of waiting for the Lord, he says, is not simply a passive halting of activity. Rather, it is what he calls a "discipline of trust," one that requires self-control and a realization that we cannot rely simply on our own efforts to achieve. He writes, "The discipline of trust is a putting down, an easing up, a releasing of tension . . . Somehow this release is identified in my mind with failure, with weakness of which something within me is afraid and ashamed." He concludes this meditation with the prayer, "Teach me to trust, to work for the renewal of my strength; all without pressure, without paying hostage to my anxieties."¹

It seems ironic, doesn't it, that we must ask God to teach us how to wait, how to trust the everlasting God enough to rely on his strength rather than our own? That kind of waiting for us can become work because having enough trust, discipline, and humility to wait doesn't always come naturally to us. We've come to depend on our own energies and abilities and have convinced ourselves that we are self-sufficient, needing help from no one, not even God. Thurman's prayer reminds me of the one sung so beautifully to us for so many years by our own Jerry Jolley: "Ain't got time to think and pray. . .," the spiritual declares. And it pleads, "Slow me down, 'cause I am tired, Lord. Slow me down, oh won't you help me, Lord."² So, we pray for God to slow us down, to teach us the discipline of trust, and when we do, we may begin to

¹Howard Thurman. *Meditations of the Heart*. Beacon Press: Boston, 1953, page 167-68.

²"Slow Me Down, Lord." Words and music by Linda Spevacek. Heritage Music Press. 2008.

see that waiting on God is the cadence that will begin to form the sacred rhythm of our lives.

Anyone who has been a part of a musical ensemble can tell you how important a cadence can be so that the musicians maintain a steady tempo and stay together. For a choir or orchestra, the conductor gives a downbeat. The drumline will play a cadence so that a marching band can step in unison. A walking bass line helps the more fluid sounds of a jazz ensemble to remain on the beat. Though these styles of music are all quite different, they all rely on a steady rhythm to establish a tempo and hold the ensemble together.

Our lives are no different, really, as we, like music, move through time at a certain speed. The question for us, I think, is who will set the tempo. Will we rush through our days, racing ahead to keep up with the ever-increasing pace of the demands of our world? Or will we work and pray for God to slow us down, to walk in time with God's cadence, to journey through life to the rhythm of our Creator's steps? The discipline of trust, of centering down and waiting on God, calls us to a regular and intentional practice of adjusting our pace so that our spirits walk in time with God.

We read throughout the Gospels that this kind of recalibration of the spirit is something Jesus did quite often. In today's Gospel lesson from Mark, we find one of the many accounts of Jesus taking time apart from crowds and from the demands of his work in order to pray. He began his earthly ministry with forty days of solitude in the wilderness, fasting and praying, and even with the needs which pressed in on him and the urgency of teaching and preparing his disciples for their own ministries, Jesus would often withdraw to a quiet place to commune with God, to "center down" so that he could listen more attentively and feel God's rhythm pulsing in his own life.

But though the cadence is important for establishing the tempo for music and for life, bass lines and drum beats alone would eventually begin to sound rather tedious without melodies and harmonies which cause them to soar. So we wait on the Lord in order to slow the pace and feel the cadence of God's Spirit, but for followers of Jesus, attending to our inward sanctuary is never about escaping inside ourselves or withdrawing from the world altogether. The rhythm of the life of faith is one that calls us inward so that we can learn to walk in step with God, only for God to lead us out again so that our lives can sing in harmony with others and with all creation.

Looking again to Thurman's words, to the words Dr. Powery shared with us, he says, "How good it is to center down! To sit quietly and see one's self pass by!" Yes, we need time to set aside the seething of our minds and the

clashing of our spirits in order to contemplate the things we are doing and to what purpose, and in order to seek direction from the One who made us. But our self-reflection is never for the sake of remaining focused inward, never for the sake of ignoring or denying the needs of the world. Rather, Dr. Thurman says, “As we listen, floating up through all the jangling echoes of our turbulence, there is a sound of another kind—a deeper note which only the stillness of the heart makes clear. It moves directly to the core of our being. Our questions are answered, our spirits refreshed, and we move back into the traffic of our daily round with the peace of the eternal in our step.”³

Again, we learn from the example of Jesus that each instance he withdrew to spend time with God in his inner sanctuary, it was never for the purpose of escaping the realities of life. Instead, the rhythm of Jesus’ life included slowing his pace for a season so that he would be able to re-engage more fully and more attentively with those around him to teach, to heal, to feed, and to redeem them. We continue reading in Mark’s Gospel that while Jesus was still out praying, his disciples came looking for him, reporting that many were searching for him. So renewed from his time of waiting on God, Jesus went out preaching and teaching, and when the man with leprosy approached him, he was able to meet that need with compassion, drawing from the wellspring of God’s mercy that was within him. Jesus recognized that in order to offer himself fully to others, he first must seek wholeness for himself, a wholeness of body, mind and spirit which can be found only through the presence the God who creates and gifts all of us, by inviting God’s Spirit to dwell in our inward sanctuary in order to redeem and transform all of life.

This pattern of moving inward in order to abide with God and then outward for community and ministry with others establishes a rhythm for the life of faith which is perhaps slower and more deliberate than the pace the world would try to impose on us. The tempo at which we often move through life pushes us to go and do and produce and achieve and convinces us that taking the time to attend to our inward sanctuary is a luxury we cannot afford, that it is not valuable because it is not “productive,” that it robs from our limited time to get things done. But following the call of the prophet to “wait on the Lord” and the example of Jesus, we find that we need the rhythm of rest and activity, of being apart and being together, of focusing inward then moving outward in order to maintain balance and wholeness. We need times of solitude in order to make the most of, even to make sense of, our times in community. We need time apart, time to be with God, to listen for God’s voice in order to strengthen and equip us for fellowship with one another and for the work to which we are called. Preparing and nurturing our inward sanctuary

³Howard Thurman. *Meditations of the Heart*. Beacon Press: Boston, 1953, page 29.

is not a luxury at all. Rather this “discipline of trust” is a necessity if we are to be effective in our outward life. It may, in fact, be the most productive thing we can do because our time with God shapes and informs everything else we attempt and allows us to fulfill our purpose with intention and effectiveness.

This sacred rhythm of our individual lives is also reflected in the rhythm of our communal life of faith, as the cadences of the Christian year ebb and flow with patterns of study, fellowship, work, and worship; with pauses for prayer, meditation, and reflection; and accented by moments of celebration. The season of Lent which is approaching will be an invitation for us to “center down” and wait on the Lord, a call for us to pause spiritually as well as physically from the hectic pace of life in order to invite God to abide with us in our inward sanctuary. Both individually and corporately, we will imitate the example of Jesus as we seek out times for stillness and reflection, times to converse with God concerning the murmurings of our hearts and the desires of God’s heart for us.

We return, then, one final time to the words of Howard Thurman who tells us that when we walk through whatever life may bring to the cadence of God’s heartbeat, our life becomes an offering to God. He writes of the stress and struggle of the daily routine, of the cares and entanglements of life which weigh us down and can leave us weary, disillusioned, even angry.

He says, “What we long for in deep anxiety is some haven, some place of retreat, some time of quiet where our bruised and shredded spirits may find healing and restoration . . . If I make my life an offering to God, then this dedication will include all of my entanglements. There follows, then, a radical change over my entire landscape, and miraculously I am free at my center. It is for this reason that it is well, again and again, to re-establish my dedication, to make repeatedly an offering of my life.”⁴

Our Narthex window looking out into the Lehman Courtyard reminds us each week of the way we have come to interpret this sacred rhythm: Come let us worship God; go to be involved in the world. When we establish this sacred rhythm, this movement of journeying inward to abide with God then moving outward to live in community with one another, we experience a peace which allows us to open our hearts as a sanctuary for God’s Spirit and the freedom to live our lives as an offering for God’s work in and through us. May it be so for us all. Amen.

⁴Ibid., page 46.

God of our hearts, we gather here to take refuge from the noise and chaos of our daily routine to seek again the quiet strength of your presence. Silence, O God, our senseless chatter and teach us to drink deeply from the living spring of your Spirit which grounds and renews us. And then when our minds are cleared of all that might distract us, help us to focus on offering praise for your abundant blessings: for days and seasons that give rhythm to life; for this place where we encounter your presence and find encouragement from one another; for every relationship that enriches our life; for work that challenges our minds and bodies; for this congregation of brothers and sisters where we learn to love one another and to serve you. For these and all of your gracious gifts, we offer our thanks and praise.

God of all life, even as we come to this place of solace and peace, we realize that we gather to pray and reflect and offer our worship, not so that we can withdraw from the world, but in order that we might be strengthened and equipped to engage in your ministries of grace to one another and to those outside these walls. Help us to respond to the needs around us with compassion and courage, remembering that we have been blessed so that we might be a blessing to others. We pray especially this day for those who are ill, for those who grieve, and for those who lack wholeness of body, mind, or spirit. We pray for those who endure the constant fear of injustice and oppression. We pray for those who struggle for food and shelter, for safety and hope throughout the world and in our own city streets. Teach us to be present to those whose days are filled with loneliness, to offer healing wherever we find suffering, to be agents of peace where there is violence, to show compassion and generosity in the face of need, to share your light and love in the darkest corners of our world.

As we gather around this table this day, Loving God, we come in humility and gratitude. We come not because we have earned the right to be here, not because we have been good enough or faithful enough to deserve our place at your feast. We come because by your grace you have welcomed us here. As we prepare to share this bread and this cup, remind us of the depth and breadth of your love for us and the extravagance of your mercy to us. Let our weary hearts be revived and our hungry souls be fed, that nurtured in your hospitality, we may feed others both with physical nourishment and with the bread of true friendship. Through the gift of the Holy Spirit, may Christ live in us and we in him so that we may welcome others and in so doing, receive you. Amen.