

**November 20, 2005 – First Baptist Church**  
**Sermon Title: The Promise of Rest**  
**Text: Hebrews 4:1-11**  
**Proclaimer: Rev. Melissa Hatfield**

Before you get your hopes up from reading the sermon title, let me share now that there will be no attendants walking the aisles offering you pillows or blankets or blindfolds. This morning I am not planning on giving you a 20-minute cat nap although I am sure that will not prohibit a handful of you from taking one. Many of us could use a nap, I imagine. So many of us are perpetually tired, lacking the sleep our body needs.

Thursday I had a dentist appointment to have a cavity filled. Let me take a commercial break to plug the importance of regular dental check-ups. Anyway, my dentist had just finished drilling on my tooth and filling the tooth when I apparently dozed off. Next thing I remember is the dentist poking my arm and saying, "We need you to bite down". Somewhere between him jabbing precious metal into the hole in my tooth and inserting a piece of paper into my mouth, I had managed to fall asleep. He and the dental assistant had a nice, little chuckle and I gave them a half-smile – literally, because my cheek and lip were numb. You must be pretty tired to fall asleep during the middle of a dental appointment. I'm sure some of you have even more amazing stories of weird contexts in which you have fallen asleep because you were exhausted.

The promise of rest, physical rest, would seem to many of us to be a great enough promise. And as much as I would like to provide that for us, it would simply be a band-aid on a gushing wound. For you see, there is a rest that when neglected makes even physical rest a vain pursuit.

There are different notions of "rest" in our passage this morning. The rest found in the account of creation where God gives a divine pattern of work and rest in balance. There is as well the celebration of the eternal rest that is promised in the finished work of redemption. But there is yet another rest that is promised for the faithful in the middle of time – in the dash of our grave marker. A promised rest that we often deny ourselves.

Let's have a little heart to heart this morning.

Have you ever stood still while life continued in motion around you and just stared? Like one of those CSI scenes where the person stands still and the camera does a 360 around them as everything around them continues on its way. People around you in their routines – a man gets out of his car, grabs his briefcase and scurries past you into the office building; a mini-van pulls up across the street and a young mother scampers out the door and disappears on the other side, emerging moments later with one child in her arm and another in toe as she hurries them into the

daycare. In that moment when everything around you continues in the warp speed that life seems to move at have you ever freeze-framed life and silently wondered "is this it?" "Is this the way God intended it to be?" Does it feel like somewhere along the way we got it wrong? We made a wrong turn? We missed the boat?

I can't help you with the chaos that surrounds you in life. I struggle myself at finding balance and saying "no". Some of it we can control, some of it we can't. I could state for you this morning all kinds of statistics and facts about how busy we are; how we attempt to do more than time could possibly allow; how we live more than not overwhelmed by all that needs to be done; and how we berate ourselves for not being able to manage it all. But I don't need to give you any statistics. Most of us already know because we are the statistics.

Anne Lamott tells the following story in her book "Bird by Bird". "Thirty years ago my older brother, who was ten years old at the time, was trying to get a report on birds written that he'd had three months to write. It was due the next day. We were out at our family cabin in Bolinas, and he was at the kitchen table close to tears, surrounded by binder paper and pencils and unopened books on birds, immobilized by the hugeness of the task

ahead. Then my father sat down beside him, put his arm around my brother's shoulder, and said, 'Bird by bird, buddy. Just take it bird by bird.'" Sometimes the best course of action is bird by bird. But what if that still is not enough? What if you get your life reorganized and simplified and you are taking it one bird at a time? What if you get to a point of self-management that would make Dr. Phil proud? Would you still find rest eluding you? This is more than possible. I know some individuals, both Christians and non-Christians, who finished their bird report years ago and they have plenty of time for sleeping, yet rest is hidden from them.

I think many of us, whether we realize it or not, keep our lives busy so we can avoid the restlessness of our souls. For if we are quiet for any amount of time, we can literally hear the aching of our spirits for a rest not found.

There are some things about the book of Hebrews that we are unsure of. We aren't certain who wrote it, to whom it was written, from where or even when. But we do know the author was giving a very strong word of encouragement to a group of people he knew well – perhaps as a Pastor. He is addressing a very urgent and as is often the case, very contemporary problem: His congregation is exhausted. They are tired – tired of serving the world, tired of worship, tired of Christian education, tired of being different from the rest of the world, tired of spiritual struggle,

tired of trying to keep their prayer life going, tired even of Jesus.

(Interpretation, pg. 3)

It is not that they are in danger of heading off into the wrong direction.

They do not have enough energy to charge off anywhere. They are exhausted in body and spirit.

We are exhausted in body and spirit.

Have you ever stood still while Christianity continued in motion around you? Christians running around you in their religious routines: A woman fills her calendar with prayer meetings and fellowships and tithes 10% without fail. A young man berates himself for once again failing to do what Jesus would do. In that moment when the Church is doing its thing, have you ever freeze-framed life and silently wondered "is this it?" "Is this the way God intended the Christian life to be?" Does it feel like somewhere along the way we got it wrong? We made a wrong turn? We missed the boat?

We've made a job out of the Christian life.

Sam Radford writes, "I remember the emptiness I felt in 1976 when, as a young Christian, I realized that doing the right things brought temporary happiness but not deep and satisfying joy...Without doubt, I saw God as

big and powerful, and I wanted to remain safely within the borders of His provision, so I lived by the law of the church. I showed up for every meeting and signed up for multiple opportunities to serve Him, but my life was still full of irritations and aggravations that robbed me of true contentment. Many people frustrate their search for fulfillment, as I did, because they don't know where to look for that one thing that will satisfy their desire for something more...I was a Christian for several years before I understood that true inner satisfaction is the most important thing in life and that it is the result of enjoying life through the abiding presence of God."

We love to give to charity, but we don't want to be charity. This is why we have so much trouble with grace. We always have to be earning something, working towards something, making something happen. God's rest doesn't work that way.

Cease from your labors. Let's talk about our labors. What are your labors? We labor to be good, to be a perfect Christian and to expect that of others around us. Here is a radical thought this morning ... cease from these labors. Entering God's rest is the reverse of how we often approach things. We enter God's rest by accepting God's rest. We will love God because God first loved us. We will obey God because we love

God. But if I cannot accept God's love, I cannot love him in return, and I cannot obey him. Self-discipline will never make us feel righteous or clean, accepting God's love will. There is a subtle arrogance in the failure to claim rest – I am so important I have no time to rest. I am so self-sufficient that I do not need God's rest.

### **The Promise of Rest**

"Our hearts are restless till they rest in Thee." St. Augustine

Verses say that God says they will never enter my rest. This isn't God's punishment. It's God's parental warning of the consequences that come from not being obedient to trust God with our lives. When we allow our hearts to be hardened or to go astray. Heb. 3:12. Ignore God and rest will evade you. God graces us with rest; and as we respond with our gratitude and receive the gift, we begin to enter that balanced life that is our destiny as the people of a loving Creator.

The time for rest is today. (verse 8 or 9) "When the people of God enter the place of worship and sing confidently of the victory of God and when the people of God live ethically in the present crisis as those who are confident that God's triumph is sure, "today" becomes a Sabbath rest."

(Thomas Long, 55)

Two major purposes of this passage:

1. The promise of rest is true
2. Encourage the readers to the kind of behavior which leads to rest.

“Nikolay Ivanovich Bukharin, communist propagandist and revolutionary leader, was sent to Kiev in the early 1920s to address a vast rally organized by the state. For an hour he harangued people about their belief in God. He used mockery, satire, ridicule, argument. When he stepped down, there was silence. Questions were invited. There was silence. Finally a priest of the Russian Orthodox Church was asked to speak and was given permission. He marched up to where Bukharin was standing, faced the vast assembly, and greeted them with the ancient liturgical Easter greeting: “Christ is risen.” Immediately the whole assembly rose to its feet and the reply came back like thunder from the heavens: “He is risen indeed”. The world, even the Christian world, is going to stand before us and harangue us to keep in step with them, that success is found in busyness and full schedules; to call us lazy and unmotivated if we don’t constantly have full schedules and agendas. Christ stood up for us and said to the vast crowd of the world “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. 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. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” (Matthew 11:28-30).

When will we stand up and reply back in the thunderous sound of our voices and our lives, "You, Lord, give us rest."