

“Away to a Deserted Place”

Psalm 23 and Mark 6.30–34

The Rev. Hal Chorpenning, Plymouth Congregational UCC, 20 July 03

Here’s a crazy idea: **rest is as important as activity**. You don’t buy that do you? Well, bear with me for awhile, and maybe you’ll at least catch a glimpse of what I think the Psalmist and Jesus are both trying to suggest.

Most of us know the 23rd Psalm by heart, but have you ever really thought about what roles the speaker and God are in? The Psalmist is the metaphorical sheep, of course, but God does all sorts of wonderful things that enable the writer to kick back and relax: encouraging him to lie down beside still waters, restoring the soul (or reviving the spirit, as the New English Bible says), providing a banquet, anointing his head with oil, and filling his cup so full that it runs over. What a great picture of God’s abundance! And what activity is the Psalmist doing during this? Nothing. Just nothing. (It reminds me of the classic children’s book, *The Story of Ferdinand*, in which the protagonist, Ferdinand the bull, “likes to sit just quietly and smell the flowers” under the cork tree, unlike the other bulls who “ran around snorting and butting, leaping and jumping.”)

And consider Jesus and the disciples. They’ve been out in the trenches with lots of people, teaching about the kingdom of God and healing, and they are pooped! Jesus realizes this and says, “Come on over; let’s take a retreat by ourselves to some remote place and rest a little.” Well, unlike the Psalmist, the apostles had **earned** a time of respite. But, ironically, they don’t actually get to rest. As they arrive at this supposedly deserted place, they are met by a huge crowd of people. Imagine that you are one of the disciples. You’ve been traveling around with one partner, brining virtually no belongings or money with you, spreading the not-too-popular message of Jesus to people around Judea. You reconnect with your colleagues and you’re ready to recharge your batteries. And then thousands of your neighbors show up expecting more ministry (and by the way, to be fed!). This is how Mark leads into the story of feeding the 5,000. Can you imagine how exhausted and dispirited the disciples must have been when Jesus began to teach, and then said, oh by the way, “give them something to eat,” and all you can come up with is two fish and five loaves of bread? But, after feeding them all, Jesus takes time to go up into the hills and pray. He needed to have time to recharge his batteries, too.

I have to say that it is very interesting for me, personally, that these two readings occur in the lectionary just as I’m about to start three weeks of vacation, hopefully a time to rejuvenate, reinvigorate, restore, recharge, re-create, and reconnect with my family. Sometimes, the stories of the Bible speak to us in a very personal manner when we find ways to apprehend the stories and apply them to our own life situations, and this week’s reading surely did that for me.

They also coincide with my first anniversary at Plymouth. I can hardly believe that it’s been a full year now, as of July 15. After you had called me to be your senior minister, but before I arrived, I started making a list of projects to consider, based on what I heard from the congregation, especially from the Search Committee. It wasn’t intended as just a one-year list, but here are some of the things I listed over a year ago. (Being a good, goal-oriented kind of guy, I made a list and kept it, but I just came across it last week when I was cleaning out some files in my office.) Here are some of the things that were on my list, as well as a long roster of Plymouth folks who have helped make things happen:

1. Initiate the consecrating stewards program. (The stewardship committee did that last fall, and our pledge giving went up 20 percent, and we had a balanced budget for the first time in several years!)
2. Start a weekly email of news and events. (Just started that a couple of months ago, and we have almost 200 email addresses on the list, thanks to Steve Freeland. If you want to be on it, fill in a blue pew card.)
3. Consider a Sunday evening contemplative service with dinner. (We started a Taizé service last October with the Board of Deacons, and Mary Sue Rowan has been leading as the convener of the service, and we'll resume in September.)
4. Investigate reports of problems with the organ. (Jan, can you play an octave in a solo stop? Repair on the instrument is virtually impossible, since Ahlborn, the German firm that made our organ, stopped supporting their instruments in the U.S.)
5. Get a new web and email address: plymouthucc.org (That's our email domain and our website URL now.)
6. Expand our website. (Thanks to Andrea and Brian Kelly for taking that project on!)
7. Design and print new stationery (Thanks to Tobey Yadon for donating all the paper, saving us a bundle!)
8. Redesign the Placard (it's a work in progress!)
9. Initiate staff meetings (Better communication all around the church, and especially among the staff, is one of my top priorities. We have weekly onsite staff meetings, monthly full staff meetings, and an annual staff retreat. Open communication among all our members and our staff is key!)
10. Determine needs for a young adult fellowship group. (The Middle-Third Herd started up late this spring, and we're having a BBQ at Bruce and Carrie Hansen's house tonight.)
11. Design a confirmation class for Plymouth (With Liz McGrew's able assistance, I actually pulled this off!)
12. Look at possibilities for a parish caring ministry program (The deacons looked at three different curricula, and under Dick's leadership, groundwork for the project has begun!)
13. Put job descriptions in place for all staff. (Our moderators Bruce Lieurance and Marge Norskog have been working hard with our Personnel Committee on this one. We have one for everyone except me!)
14. Three-part exploration class for new members. (I'm thrilled that we've welcome 60 new members in the last year: we've grown Plymouth by 15 percent! Thanks to all of you for showing up!)

It's been a wonderfully busy, productive year. And I'm feeling a bit like the disciples (but I'm not planning on having you all over to my place for lunch after church...sorry!).

Three other really big new initiatives also need to be mentioned:

1. The arrival of our interim associate minister, Dick Einerson, who adds an amazing dimension to our pastoral care here at Plymouth with his wealth of experience both in the parish and in hospital chaplaincy.
2. Plymouth's dramatic leadership in mission giving through Our Church's Wider Mission, and

3. The chartering and work of a Strategic Planning team that will help chart a course for the next three to five years at Plymouth, paying close attention to where the Spirit is calling us as a congregation.

It's been a great year, but there are still plenty of challenges ahead: the Strategic Planning Team has new mission and values statements members of the congregation have helped develop. And now we're focusing on three areas: appropriate **staffing** levels and configuration, the **worship** life of the church (including style and schedule), and congregational life (helping members to unwrap their gifts for ministry, training for **lay leadership**, encouraging fellowship groups and small groups within the church).

After this team makes programmatic recommendations to the church, the Long-Range Planning Committee will look at how we're using space and whether we need to augment classroom space. (We sure need to do this with our offices: Dick's desk is now in the choir room!)

And we need to be mindful of the wider community and the wider church: not just Ft. Collins or the region, but how we can affect our nation and the world.

To say that it's a busy time in the life of our congregation would be a dramatic understatement. As part of the reflection of our centennial this year, I've been asking you to consider the question, "What is your dream for Plymouth?" I hope you've done that, and I hope you'll continue doing that.

My hope is that our centennial will cause us to look backward and be inspired by what our forbears at Plymouth have done in response to their faith, and that it will cause us to ask how we, too, can respond as we move into our second century.

While it's been a year of accomplishment and busy-ness, summer is also a time for slowing down the pace a little. Donna Schaper, who was an associate conference minister in Massachusetts when I was an associate conference minister in Connecticut wrote a book a few years back, called *Sabbath Keeping*, and in it she writes, "The best way to keep sabbath is to slow down....In a culture that demands more and more, faster and faster, Sabbath is a spiritual form of civil disobedience. Our marching orders are to speed up. Instead, we slow down. We do so out of love for God our Creator, and our of respect for our creation. We were not made to march fast."¹ Well, at least we weren't made to march fast *all* the time!

If you've ever lived in another country, you may have experienced a culture in which the tempo of life is set by *walking*. When I lived in St. Andrews, a small university town on the North Sea in Scotland, I walked everywhere: to the pub, to class, and on rare occasions, to chapel. That was my only mode of transportation, except the train to Edinburgh. When you have to allow yourself 15 minutes to walk somewhere, it gives you a chance to think and reflect. But, we live in an automotive culture in which I can determine where I will go, when I will go, and how fast I will go (and even how many yellow lights I will go through). But, that's not the worst of it, we now have to keep pace with the Internet. I don't know about you, but electrons moving across silicon move faster than my mind and my body do. But, as Donna Schaper says, "The best way to keep Sabbath is to slow down." Maybe we should learn to occasionally mark our live *andante* (the pace of walking), rather than *presto!*

We put so much pressure on ourselves to perform, but we need seasons in our lives when we can slow down. As the Hebrew wisdom writer Quoheloth (whom we know as Ecclesiastes) records: "For everything there is a season, and for every activity under

¹ Donna Schaper, *Sabbath Keeping*, p. 85

heaven its time.”² There is even a time for *inactivity*, rest, and regeneration. I need times when I can just be a human ***being***, rather than a human ***doing***.

We also commit the sin of pride, and we display our agnosticism, when we act as though we ourselves make everything happen. Haven't we ever heard of grace? Or the movement of the Holy Spirit? Our accomplishments, however great, are ***never*** just ours; they belong as well to God who created and empowers and inspires us.

My wish for you is that you, too, will find a time for regeneration and relaxation this summer. And that you will return to the work of the church with fresh inspiration for the dreams we will dream and the work we will do together.

I'd like to close with these beautiful words from the Episcopal Book of Common Prayer:

O God, in the course of this busy life, give us times of refreshment and peace; and grant that we may so use our leisure to rebuild our bodies and renew our minds, that our spirits may be opened to the goodness of your creation; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

² Ecc. 3.1