

A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church
“Rest & Vocation”
By Eric Howell
Hebrews 4:9-16
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The third and fourth chapters of Hebrews in the New Testament are based on Psalm 95 from the Old Testament. Psalm 95 is based on the events of the Exodus, also from the Old Testament, but much earlier. In the Exodus, the people rebelled against Moses and Aaron, God’s chosen leaders. They ‘hardened their hearts’ and ‘put God to the test.’ And so were forced to wander for 40 years. You may remember that the journey from Egypt to Israel should have only taken a couple of weeks but because of their unwillingness to be obedient, it took 40 years. The whole generation of people who rebelled against God died in the desert before God used Joshua to lead the people into the promised land. So, Psalm 95, remembering this, laments a people who would not listen to God and because of that, could not enter the promised land, or as Psalm 95 puts it—they never entered God’s rest.

They shall not enter My rest. The people who rebelled against God shall not enter My rest, the promised land. Usually, when we think of rest, we think of sleep, or at least the near-coma state of post-lunch football watching. We think of taking a needed break from work and maybe even from life. But rest, here the way God uses it, means the living in the land promised to the wandering Israelites. Surely, the thought of living in one place, even the labor of building houses, and the toil of tilling the ground sounded like rest compared to trudging through the wilderness all those years. It probably sounded downright relaxing compared to all of that. But the idea of the land as rest meant more than relaxing, more than finding an easier life. It meant coming into a space that they were intended to be in. It meant coming into their own. Rest, in this sense, is about being who you are meant to be, discovering your identity, living into your purpose, being comfortable in your skin, being accepted for who you are, even by yourself. Rest doesn’t mean an absence of work. Rest is being right where you are supposed to be and doing right what you are supposed to be doing. When you are in that moment, it’s like time takes on a new dimension and you leave behind the *chronos* of creation and enter the *kairos* of God’s time. Prayer can do this. So can quietly watching your sleeping baby. Gazing into the eyes of your fiancée feels like this. So does working in the garden. Your job can feel like this when it’s something you love. Worship is supposed to be like this and sometimes is. Rest is feeling like you are getting to be who you were meant to be.

The great tragedy of the generation lost in the wilderness is that they never became who they were meant to be. They were freed from slavery. But never experienced true freedom. They started the journey, but didn’t complete it. Their lives ended without ever being the people they were meant to be in the place they were meant to be. They never found God’s rest and never found rest in God.

This idea of rest—getting to become who you were meant to be—is what DaySpring has been from the very beginning. Not to disparage churches that have activities all the time and organize themselves by committees and committees on committees, or to say that all church programs are bad things, or to say that churches who do worship with wall-to-wall sound are somehow not worshipping, or that churches who have project after project are too busy, but people who came to become and then gather with DaySpring were looking for rest. They were a people looking for God’s rest, and a whole lot of us have joined them on this quest since then. And what we’ve found is that to be who we were meant to be has meant stopping, being quiet, listening, and being open to God’s Spirit by being simple in what we do so we can be open to the richness and variety of what God is doing.

I admit I was a little perplexed on this issue of rest when we first came. I mean, on one hand, I heard, “This is a place of rest.” And in the next breath I heard, “This is a place where everyone has a role and job to do and they do it.” So which is it, I wondered? Are we a place of rest or a place of work?

I heard about our worship services, worship is to be a space of peace and rest. In the next breath—worship is a place of intense spiritual effort. You can’t just come and sit and be entertained. We won’t do all the work for you. There’s a lot of spiritual energy here in worship. Are we a place of rest or a place of work?

And about our missions and ministry: In one breath, we are careful not to over-commit, so we don’t get distracted from worship. In the next breath, or breaths, I began hearing amazing stories of the ways you are out there helping hurting people. You aren’t just giving lip service to a couple of programs, some of you are putting your heart and lives out there the way Jesus did. There’s a lot of ministry happening here. Are we a place of rest or a place of work?

I’ve joked with Burt about this. I was told that the pastor of DaySpring gets to sit and read Maximus the Confessor by the creek and take prayer walks through the back paths. I’ve asked Burt if he was sure he was pastor of this church. Between building a new building and welcoming three new staff members this year, there’s a lot going on around here. Are we a place of rest or a place of work?

So I was perplexed by this and wondered if we weren’t false advertising. Do we tell people we are a place of rest until we get them in here and then make them go to work? I was interested to know.

What I think I’ve learned is that there’s a greater truth about rest and a greater truth about work than we usually figure on. In Hebrews, rest is used as a descriptor of the land that is their promise, of the seventh day of creation, of the Sabbath Day, but even more of the life we are invited to live in Christ who said, “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me for I am gentle and lowly in heart and you will find rest for your souls, for my yoke is easy and my burden is light” (Matthew 11:29-30). The land, the Sabbath, the creation, a church—any place we see and experience rest—these are promises of something greater still—the rest not of vacation from life, but vocation of life in Christ.

The key for us, one of the aspects that I think makes DaySpring a very special place, is that there is a focus to our work. You have a sense for what's important. You have a sense for what you are about. And you aren't arrogant about it, but you are just quietly confident that whatever evolves here in our buildings or our budgets, our programs or our missions, whatever happens we just trust that we will still know who we are. That doesn't mean every single thing is resolved. Saying we know who we are, for us, doesn't mean that we have defined all things—either policies or doctrines. Part of being who we are is an openness to change and an openness to variety and different perspectives. But we are unified in faith and life in Jesus Christ as we articulate that faith through the ancient Creed and the historic church. It doesn't mean every question is answered for us. It means we are a people who can agree on what is essential and may agree on what is not as essential. Augustine wrote, "In essential, unity; in doubtful things liberty; but in all things love."

And this is also a kind of rest. It's a willingness to let some things go, to hold them lightly because we hold some things tightly and we can't let them go. We hold tightly to tradition and meet it with creativity; we hold tightly to community and meet it with hospitality; we hold tightly to simplicity and meet it with an ability to be light on our feet and embrace the new. We hold tightly to hurting people and meet one another in our shared life together.

The people who first came together were looking to be a worshipping community that stayed focused on worship and let everything else grow from there. And today this impulse is alive. When a group starts a Life Together Group for undergraduates, their first impulse is to create space to pray together. And Michael is asking himself, "How can we help the youth learn to experience and enjoy worship?" And Tiffani is planning children's activities around the liturgical calendar to begin forming the faith of our children around worship. And sometimes when someone in the church is really hurting, we bring casseroles and make hospital visits, but sometimes we also gather in the chapel for a special prayer service with the family. We are still a church that focuses on worship, and everything else—our programming and pastoral care, our outreach and community building—grows from there.

The first families were looking to be a sharing community of high trust in one another and to resist over-organizing. And today, you won't find more than one or two committees in the church. You are asked to do the work of the church, you are given the resources to do it, and then you do it—you mow the yard, sweep the floors, teach the classes, serve the lunches, organize the mission trips. When we have questions, we ask. When we are unsure, we gather opinions. When we don't know, we don't pretend we know. I've never been a part of a church that had such a high level of trust in its staff or been a part of a staff that had such a high level of trust in the lay leadership and people as DaySpring.

We were looking for rest—that is healing when healing is needed, that is hospitable when welcome is needed; that is empowering; that is holy. And we still are today. It is said sometimes, this is a place of rest. At its best, it is the rest of a calm assurance of participating in the will of God.

This is the rest we are invited into by Christ. It's a vocation. It's finding your identity and purpose in Him and living into those as much as possible. It's spending more and more of your time and energy doing what you are most passionate about and called to do in service to a good and loving God.

The Word of God is sharper than a double-edged sword, piercing the division of soul and spirit, joints and marrow, thoughts and intentions (Hebrews 4:12). Tom Long, a commentator, understands this to suggest that God's word is sharp enough that it can separate what really matters from what seems to matter. "The word of God takes an ordinary day and makes it 'today,' takes an ordinary moment and makes it the time of crisis and decision, takes a routine event and makes it the theater of the glory of God, takes an ordinary life and calls it to holiness" (Interpretation, Heb, 60).

It is said that during the Montgomery, Alabama bus boycott, some African-Americans declined rides in the car pool that had been organized and 'demonstrated with their feet' by walking to and from work every day. One elderly woman known as Old Mother Pollard was among those who walked. Martin Luther King, Jr. told her at church one evening, "Now listen, you have been with us all along, so now you go on and start back to ridin' the bus cause you are too old to keep walking." "Oh no," she protested, "I'm gonna walk just as long as everybody else walks. I'm gonna walk 'til it's over." King responded, "But aren't your feet tired?" "Yes," Old Mother Pollard said, "My feet are tired, but my soul is rested." (told in Weaver, Cloud of Witnesses, 157).

This is the vocation of DaySpring as much as anything, to be about what is important and to let fall away what is unimportant. This vocation is a freeing, life-giving way of spending your life. Of doing what you were born to do.

If I have one hope for the people of DaySpring, it is that each person find your identity in Christ and your purpose in God's kingdom and that you live out of that sense of identity and into that purpose. This is the gift you gave me by inviting me to be your pastor. You gave me a role very much in my identity and you gave me a vocation that fits my purpose, and a community to sharpen me and help me become what God made me to be. You gave this gift to me of being part of a church that for the most part knows the difference between what matters and what only seems to matter. And you've helped me learn to tell the difference. I hope we together give it to each of you. And if today you don't know who you are and you don't know where you're going, and you don't know how to find what really matters because life is so full of stuff that shouldn't matter but is your reality, if life is so busy or so overwhelming or so painful right now that you wonder if you would ever find peace, come here to Christ and sit and be quiet and be centered and listen when you can, and rest in Him until you find the rest your soul longs for.