

Homily for December 11, 2019

There is a wonderful legend concerning the quiet years of Jesus, the years prior to his visible ministry. The legend claims that Jesus the carpenter was one of the master yoke-makers in the Nazareth area. People came from miles around for a yoke, hand carved and crafted by Jesus son of Joseph.

When customers arrived with their team of oxen Jesus would spend considerable time measuring the team, their height, the width, the space between them, and the size of their shoulders. Within a week, the team would be brought back and he would carefully place the newly made yoke over the shoulders, watching for rough places, smoothing out the edges and fitting them perfectly to this particular team of oxen.

That's the yoke Jesus invites us to take. Do not be misled by the word "easy," for its root word in Greek speaks directly of the tailor-made yokes: they were "well-fitting." The yoke Jesus invites us to take, the yoke that brings rest to weary souls, is one that is made exactly to our lives and hearts. The yoke he invites us to wear fits us well, does not rub us nor cause us to develop sore spirits and is designed for two. His yokes were always designed for two. And our yoke-partner is none other than Christ himself.

Running throughout all scripture from the beginning to the end is the theme that ours is a burden bearing Christ. He is not just a Lord whom we burden, and we do, but a Lord who actually solicits our burdens, inviting us to enter into his rest.

Scripture tells us that rest was part of God's plan from the beginning: "God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work he had done in creation" (Genesis 2:3). The day of rest, or Sabbath, was meant as a time to honor our unique relationship with God. Of all the animals on the earth, men and women are the only ones who take this day off. To a cow or a cat, one day is just like the next. But we humans are made for work *and* rest. We are made to enjoy friendship with God just as much as we are made to tend to the earth.

Throughout Israel's history, people understood the Sabbath primarily as a gracious gift. Over time, however, more and more rules concerning proper conduct on the Sabbath were added, to the point at which some came to see this special day as a burden—or as an occasion to judge everyone else. Did my neighbor say no to the right activities? Questions like that one became more important than whether our neighbor, or we ourselves, for that matter, had said yes to God.

Then came Jesus and his promise: "I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28). He didn't say, "I will give you rest on the Sabbath." Just "I will give you rest"—the rest that comes through faith in him, a rest that we can experience each and every day.

When worry and anxiety get the better of you, he can give you rest through his presence.

When you become painfully aware of your shortcomings, he can give you rest through his mercy.

When you feel overburdened, he can give you rest as he walks with you and lightens your load.

The next time you find yourself worrying about life, take a moment to turn and say yes to Jesus and his promise of rest. You won't always *feel* different. Worry may even creep back in. But as you persist in faith, you will gradually sense his presence and his peace. Jesus has promised you rest, and he is always faithful to his promises.¹

¹ Latter part of this homily taken from <https://wau.org/meditations/>