

Northwestern Ohio Synod's 2024: *The Year of Rest*

Sermon Title: "Called to Rest"

Preacher: The Rev. Andrew (Drew) Tucker

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Psalm 62:1-2

Truly my soul finds rest in God;

my salvation comes from God.

Truly God is my rock and my salvation;

God is my fortress, I will never be shaken.

Jeremiah 6:16

This is what the Lord says:

"Stand at the crossroads and look;

ask for the ancient paths,

ask where the good way is, and walk in it,

and you will find rest for your souls.

But you said, 'We will not walk in it.'"

Matthew 11:28-30

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, 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.

Sermon

May Jesus, who rose from death to new life, bring Easter vibrancy into every day of your life. Amen.

Greetings in the name of Jesus, whose death and resurrection opens to us all the way of everlasting life!

I'm Pastor Drew Tucker and it's my joy to serve as the Executive Director of HopeWood Outdoors, your Lutheran outdoor ministry organization here in the state of Ohio. No matter when you're watching this sermon, or where you're watching it, I want you to know that HopeWood Outdoors is grateful for your partnership, strengthened by your stewardship, and excited to serve you at camp not only during the summer but throughout the year. If you've got retreat needs, event needs, or new ideas for shared ministry, please reach out!

My close friends, and especially my wife, find it funny that the synod office invited me to preach as a part of 2024: *The Year of Rest*. Now, to be clear, the invitation was meant to offer rest to your pastors and deacons, who preach so frequently and faithfully, for they indeed deserve rest!

I decided to take the opportunity to dive deep into the topic of rest because, well, I'm bad at resting. And that's a problem. Not just because I need more sleep, though that's true. Not just because it sets a bad example for our staff and campers, though that's also true. The fact that I'm bad at resting is a problem because God calls us to rest as creatures and as Christians. That's why this sermon is titled Called to Rest.

Now I know that I'm not alone in my lack of commitment to rest. Though workaholism isn't in the DSM 5, the current standard of diagnosis for personality disorders, there is plenty of evidence to suggest that work is an obsession among Americans. There's a cult of obsession with work that demands the sacrifice of our calendars, our wallets, and all too often, our bodies. In fact, that sounds like more than obsession. That sounds like idolatry.

This idol takes various shapes in different situations. For some, it's one job that has their entire devotion, plus all the lawn care, the house projects, and other kinds of labor that take up practically all time. For others, it's the gig economy, where a number of part time jobs and side hustles drive people to work endless hours. For still others, it's the combination of rehearsals and practices and

volunteer opportunities and extracurricular activities. Who has time for rest amidst all this?

Now, to be clear, for many in our society, this comes as a necessity outside of their control. With the impacts of inflation over the last couple of years, some of this work is driven by rising cost of living. One of the hurdles to rest is simply how much it costs to live in a society like ours. If life is too expensive to allow rest, that's not one person's fault, but the fault of our country, culture, and community.

Of course, that's not the only issue at hand. Plenty of people with more than enough resources still work too hard for too long. I probably fall somewhere in this category. We're not wealthy, to be sure, but as a married couple with two kids and two full time jobs, I don't need to work more in order to survive. But I also happen to be an author, who published books and articles. I also am an editor who is responsible for recruiting writers for a devotion, then editing and posting their submissions. I'm also an education and leadership consultant who works with multiple clients.

But why? Not just why do I do those things—though that's a legitimate question—but why do I fill the time that God's called me to use for rest?

In fact, I wonder why it is so hard for so many of us to rest. In our readings, there's a number of different depictions of rest. For the psalmist, rest seems easy. But that's not been my experience. Not always.

How often are we presented with rest, but like Jeremiah's audience, we defiantly say, "we will not take the path of rest"? The idol of work, and really the idol of productivity, feels too tempting to ignore.

When Jesus speaks of an easy yoke and a light burden, do we believe that? Do we trust that Jesus means for us not just to work, but to find work that doesn't break our backs? Work that allows us to rest as well?

Like all idols, there's something good about productivity. After all, the fall's harvest depends on the winter's tilling, the spring's planting, and the summer's tending. There's nothing inherently wrong with productivity. Instead, we've just overemphasized work's goodness in ways that make productivity too much of a good thing.

Consider water and food, certainly good things! Too much of them at once, though? Drowning on one end and cardiopulmonary problems on the other.

Every good thing has its limits, including work. And rest is the sacred limit that ensures the continued goodness of our work. Because let's be honest: just because you work too much doesn't mean you work well. Sometimes more work leads to less productivity because, in excess, work becomes less efficient and less effective.

Rest is how we put work in its proper context. After all, Israel heard God's promise of the sabbath even during forty years of wilderness wandering. Even under threat of starvation, fleeing the oppression of Pharaoh, God's people had time for sabbath. So why don't you and I make time for it, too?

I think that one reason we do not embrace God's rest is that we don't embrace God's original blessing.

Lutherans rightly emphasize the presence of sin in the world—after all, people who are saved by grace through faith need to know what they're saved from! But sometimes our emphasis on original sin overshadows the original blessing that God bestowed on all creation. After all, before the first sin, God looked at humanity, indeed at all creation, and said, “ah, yes! You are very good.”

Our refusal to rest is, in itself, sin. We look to the psalmist, as human as you or I, and say they're an unrealistic idealist who has no idea what the demands of 21st century life look like. Like those who received Jeremiah's prophecy, we refuse God's ways and the rest that comes with them, instead following down the path of everlasting work instead of the way of everlasting life.

Here, in the Easter season, the power of Christ's resurrection looms large. The abundant life of Jesus overcomes sin, death, and the devil, that triumvirate of evil that seeks to sap life from the earth. The consequences of sin are no longer ours to bear. The devil's battle cry is silenced by a single proclamation from our Prince of Peace. And even death, though still at work in our world, no longer has the final say. God's work through Holy Week and Easter not only reminds us of the original command to rest, but reminds us that we're able to rest because God has already worked miracles on our behalf.

To choose rest is to reveal our trust in Christ's resurrection. To prioritize sabbath is to embrace Easter truth in our everyday lives.

Admittedly, I need convincing of this sometimes. I need reminded that God's work, first in creation and then in

redemption, is more than enough for us. I'm kind of obstinate, so even though I know that God's commanded rest, invited rest, even worked miracles so that we can rest, I wonder if rest really has any benefits.

Fortunately, people much smarter than I—and with much more patience than I—have studied the impacts of rest on human existence. And wouldn't you know it, the God who calls us to rest created our bodies and minds in ways that benefit from rest!

Consider prayer as a kind of rest. All throughout scripture we read that prayer is a priority. But that's more than just some religious dictates disconnected from reality. Stopping to pray both keeps you connected to God in relationship and has very real physiological benefits. Research from neuroscientist Andrew Newberg's has shown that, when taking intentional time to pray, we redirect energy into the areas of our brain that foster compassion and empathy. By daily taking time to slow down and make space for conversation with God, we literally become more like Christ through prayerful rest.

Sleep also has incredible value for these God-given bodies. Getting enough rest has diverse benefits, from enhancing memory, to increasing attention span, and even

promoting heart health. God designed this body not for constant work, but to be a balance of good work and good rest. If our body is a temple of God, one of the best ways we can care for this temple is to give it the sleep that it needs.

It's even true that embracing nature is a kind of rest that reinvigorates our lives. Yes, of course, the camp guy is going to proclaim the merits of being outside. But it's not just me! Multiple studies have shown that getting outside and reconnecting with the earth, from forests and grasslands to farms and sports fields, have very real benefits for your physical and mental health. From improved respiratory function and a boosted immune system to decreased depression and increased motivation, embracing the rest of creation in playful, purposeful rest is beneficial to mental benefits.

All of these serve as reminders to me that rest is purposeful. It's not just boredom, but instead an intentional pause that God built into our lives at the very creation of the world. Rest is a deliberate digression from the daily grind that restores our bodies, minds, and spirits for the lives God's called us to live. It's because God calls us to live that God calls us to rest.

Ultimately, dear friends, life in Christ—the life made possible by the miracle of Easter—is shaped by the balance of action and rest. Rest is the reminder that Jesus has already accomplished the impossible for us by ensuring sin doesn't separate us from God. Rest is life's constant refrain that our work will not save us because God's already saved us! These bodies are more than machines, for from the first moments of creation, they reflect the image of God.

Rather than a waste of time, rest is a God-given gift of time well spent. Rest is good for our bodies. Rest is good for our minds. Rest is good for our souls. All because the God who made us, the God who saved us, is the one who looked at creation and said, "Ah yes! You are very good." And then do you know what God did the next day?

God rested.

May we all, the images of God, reflect God in our rest as well.