

An Invitation to Rest

A Summer Reflection

BY BISHOP PAUL-GORDON CHANDLER

“The present state of the world and the whole of life is diseased. If I were a doctor and were asked for my advice, I should reply, ‘Create silence.’”

~ SOREN KIERKEGAARD, 19TH CENTURY
DANISH PHILOSOPHER AND THEOLOGIAN

*Psalm 23, from the Stuttgarter Psalter,
9th century illuminated manuscript*



The summer season is usually a time for a change of pace, where we slow down a little, to seek some rest and relaxation. It may entail going away on a vacation of one sort or another, near or far, or just staying home, albeit with a slower routine. This season I am reminded of those comforting words in Psalm 23 that many of us know by heart; *“The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not be in want. He makes me lie down in green pastures and leads me beside still waters. He revives my soul.”* How many times do you think those words have been spoken, especially at moments when people need all the rest, encouragement, support and hope that they could possibly muster? How many times have we spoken them ourselves, when down, drained or discouraged?

When we lived in Tunisia, North Africa, I regularly visited a British man in prison. It was a very dark place. He had been sentenced to life in prison, with really no hope for release in that dictatorial regime. Every time I visited, he looked completely exhausted and weak, and deeply depressed. Before I departed he would always ask me to recite Psalm 23 with him. I would clasp his right hand in mine, the only hand he was allowed to put through the cold iron bars. As the intimidating guards looked on, we would say those words of deep comfort together: *“The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not be in want. He makes me lie down in green pastures and leads me beside still waters. He revives my soul.”* And by the time we spoke the words “and leads me beside still waters,” he would break down sobbing. It was an experience I’ll never forget.

The Psalmist believed that God is like a shepherd, who leads us through the shadows of life, into the quiet, serenity and peacefulness of green pastures, into the calm and refreshment that exists beside still waters. The poet of Psalm 23 had been given a glimpse of the beautiful nature of God, and the desire of God for each of us.

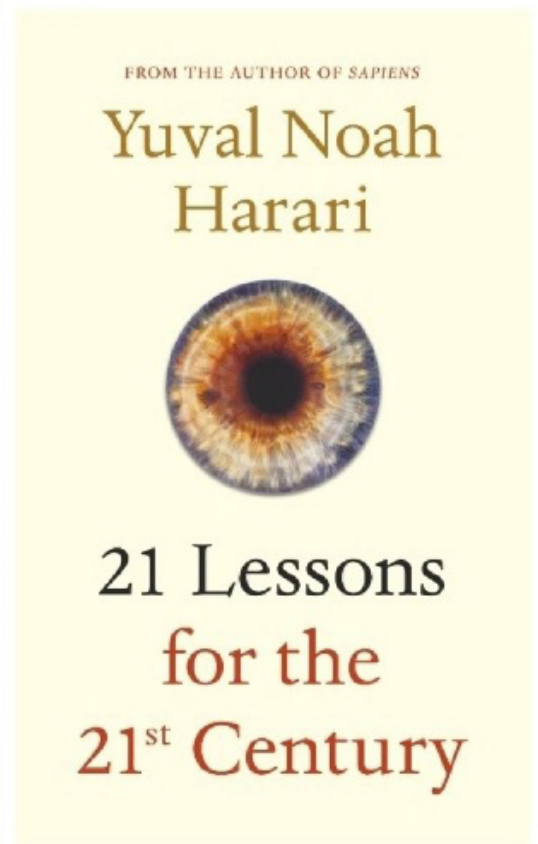
I am reminded this summer of that statement by Jesus in the sixth chapter of Mark's Gospel where Jesus says in *The Message* translation, *"Come away by yourselves; let's take a break and get a little rest.' For there was constant coming and going. They didn't even have time to eat. So they got in the boat and went off to a remote place by themselves."*

No picture has drawn people to Jesus with such magnetism as the picture of him as the Good Shepherd - who cares for his sheep, lets them rest, waters them, feeds that part of them which is hungriest and most in need of feeding, picks them up when they can't walk anymore, and who constantly watches over them and preserves and protects them.

Life is very often exhausting – the pressures, the soul-draining busyness, the non-stop speed and intensity of our world, the lack of quiet and “down-time” to just “be.” We often have so little time to just soak in the caring, loving and calming presence of our beautiful Creator.

The author Yuval Noah Harari, most known for his New York Times best-selling book, *Sapiens*, has a powerful section in his more recent book titled *21 Lessons for the 21st Century*. In the chapter on leadership in today's world, he writes:

“...if you want to go deeply into any subject, you need a lot of time, and in particular you need the privilege of wasting time....to allow little seeds of insight to slowly grow and blossom. If you cannot afford to waste time, you will never find the truth...you need to allow yourself to waste a lot of time wandering here and there on the periphery... Leaders are thus trapped as in today's world they cannot waste too much precious time.”



Today's culture is often known as one of non-stop activity, associated with living in a state of endless movement and noise. There is no question that all this commotion, intensity and busyness can hinder one's connection with the Divine, with ramifications to our own wellness and wholeness. And I believe Jesus's example and invitation offers us a way out of today's soul-draining culture. A portrait of Jesus that we so rarely consider is that of a Jesus who believes in *rest*. Often, when people read the Gospels, they tend to envision a no-nonsense and efficient Messiah, full of purpose, moving from village to synagogue to hilltop to lakeside, within a whirlwind of miracles, parables, teaching, and transformational conversations, as he works to save the world before his own 33-year clock runs down. However, a high-strung intense Jesus is not who emerges the Gospels. Rather, we find a Jesus who recognizes, and honors, and tends to his own tiredness. We encounter a teacher who pulls his overheated, exhausted and hungry disciples away from their labor and striving. We discover a Savior who probes below the surfaces of our busyness, and pinpoints the hunger our culture won't often allow us to name - the hunger for space, reflection, solitude, nourishment, recreation, rest, and sleep.

Some of you have heard of the TV series titled *The Chosen* about the life of Christ. While I was a little wary of the series at first, as so many Biblical film dramas are quite amateur productions, I was inspired to see the way they presented Jesus. His very presence calms people. He is playful and not too intense. He laughs and lives fully in the present moment. He repeatedly takes time to go off by himself. He certainly isn't a hurrying Jesus.

Jesus invites us all to follow him by saying, "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest... and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

I am reminded of the experience of Jesus's disciples after returning from their first ministry tour (Mark 6). They return bursting with exhilarating stories of the healings and effective mission campaigns they've pulled off on their own for the first time. They are enthusiastic, caffeinated, and ready for their next assignment from Jesus – their next divine mission. In their minds, the crowds are waiting, and it's time to go out again. But Jesus disagrees. Where the disciples see energy, Jesus sees overstimulation. Where the disciples see a tightly packed schedule, Jesus sees a poor sense of balance and rhythm – and a lack of margin in their lives. Where the disciples see invincibility, Jesus sees their inner need. The need to process life and reflect. The need to eat, pray, play, and sleep. The need to learn the art of "pulling away." Jesus recognizes that the disciples need a break. Jesus, meanwhile, is not even in top form himself. He has just lost his cousin, the prophet John the Baptist, the one who baptized him and spent a lifetime in the wilderness preparing the way for him. Even worse, Jesus has lost him through a violent and senseless murder. Jesus has many reasons to feel emotionally drained.

"Let's go off by ourselves to a quiet place and rest awhile," he says to his disciples as the crowds press in around them at the edge of the Sea of Galilee. "Come away with me." "They are words of love, tenderness, and wisdom. Quite



Jesus in *The Chosen* TV series

simply, Jesus wants to provide a time of respite and recuperation for his friends. He wants to make sure that in the midst of their eagerness for service, that they value *being* more than *doing*, and experience the source of true strength.

I have found it fascinating to pay attention to what may seem like “throwaway” passages in the Gospels. They are often just little transition verses which often precede or follow the main events of Jesus’s life. Passages like, “But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed” (Luke 5:16). Or “The next day as they were leaving Bethany, Jesus was hungry” (Mark 11:12) or “Jesus was sleeping” (Matt 8:24). And “[Jesus] didn’t want anyone to know which house he was staying in” (Mark 7:24). These “minor” verses are vital glimpses of Jesus’s humanity, his physical hunger and tiredness, his need to withdraw, and his desire for solitude and prayer.

These glimpses remind us that Jesus, in relating God’s desire for us, himself hungers, sleeps, eats, rests, withdraws, and grieves. Jesus is like us and needs rests. This is a theme that runs through the Scriptures from its very first pages. In Genesis, God rests on the seventh day, and calls the Sabbath holy for all future generations.

Honoring the whole concept of Sabbath is no small feat in our 21st century lives, where every hour of every day is measured and counted upon. Rest doesn’t necessarily come easily or naturally. However, to remember that God rests, and that Jesus rests, is profoundly encouraging. We don’t ever really need to run on fumes, with little margin in our lives, when Jesus himself insists that his followers do otherwise. The Sabbath is the only thing in the Creation account that God calls “holy.”

We are all meant to “come away,” and to honor the rhythms and borders of work and play, inside and outside, online and in-person, in sleep and in wakefulness. This is why Jesus asks his disciples to leave the noise and crowds behind. Sometimes, we need to unplug. Fortunately, we follow a Lord who is unapologetic about his need for rest and solitude, and who has no hesitancy in withdrawing when he and his disciples need a break. He does so even when the needs around him continue to press in on all sides.



Coptic monk retreating to the Egyptian desert

Perhaps the greatest spiritual discipline needed in today’s world is that of cultivating space and silence in our lives, in order to make room for God. It is foundational for the spiritual life. I recall the profound words of Paul Tournier, the late 20th century renowned Swiss psychologist. A deeply spiritual man and a person of profound faith, he once responded in an interview when asked about the importance of silence in the spiritual life; “Modern people lack silence. They no longer lead their own lives; they are dragged along by events... If your

Jesus is able to do this because he knows the nature of God enough to “let go.” He knows God sees us all as precious and more loved than we can ever imagine. Hence, it not just OK to rest, Jesus shows us it is a divine calling to do so
Jesus invites his disciples, “Come away to a deserted place...” This is perhaps why ancient Middle Eastern Christianity over the last 2000 years has placed such emphasis on the spiritual gift of the desert that surrounds them. There is this wonderful Arab proverb that says: “The further you go into the desert, the closer you come to God.”

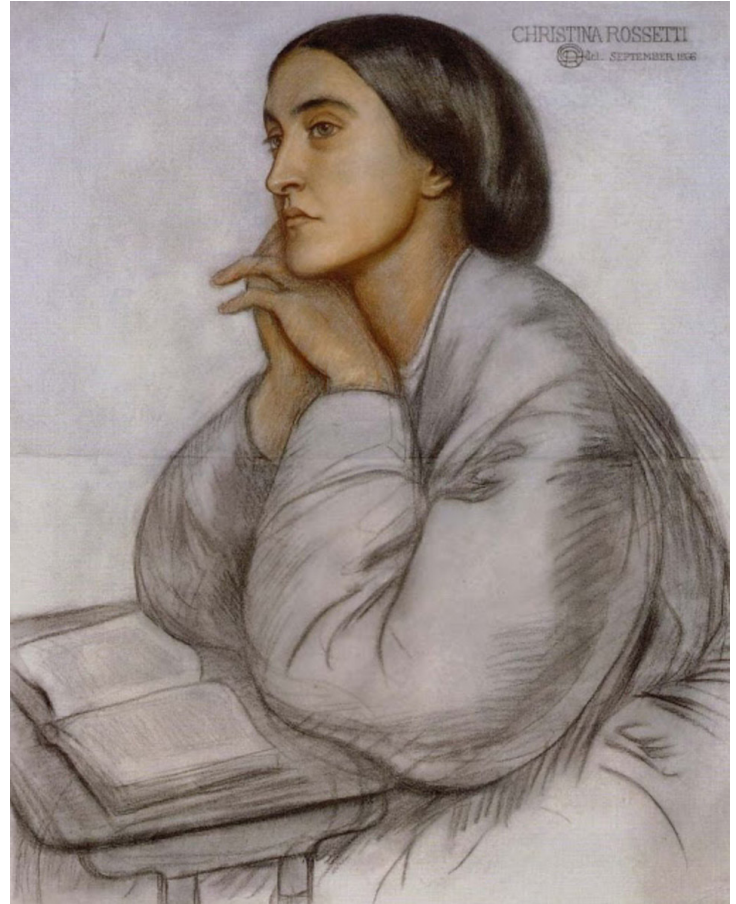
life is chock-full already, there won't be room for anything else. Even God can't get anything else in. So, it becomes essential to cut something out."

The Scriptures invite us to lean into rest and quietness, in order for our souls, the deepest core of our being, to be refreshed, restored, and replenished. Only then can we fully experience God's loving embrace and hear that still, small voice of God, who more often than not, speaks in the form of a whisper.

I close with a prayer by the 19th century English poet Christina Rossetti (1830-1894), who suffered from Grave's Disease, titled *In Weariness*.

"O Lord Jesus Christ, who is like the shadow of a great rock in a weary land, you see your weak creations, weary of labor; weary of pleasure, weary of hope deferred, weary of self. In your abundant compassion and feeling with us, and with your unspeakable tenderness, bring us, we pray, into your rest."

Take hope,
+Paul-Gordon



*Portrait of Christina Rossetti by artist
Dante Gabriel Rossetti*