

Sermon for Sunday, November 8, 2015
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
The Very Rev. Canon Dr. Raewynne J. Whiteley

“It is in vain that you rise so early and go to bed so late; *
vain, too, to eat the bread of toil,
for he gives to his beloved sleep.”

There are some parts of Scripture
that seem to belong well and truly in the past
and there are others
that feel as if the writer was living
here on Long Island
in the twenty-first century!

The St James train station
is at its busiest
between 6 and 7 in the morning
as people begin their daily commute
to the city;
the traffic on the LIE
begins to back up
around seven,
and the same things happens in reverse
every evening.

Our teenagers
are dragged out of bed
at dawn
and are still doing homework
late into the night;
and all of us
get grumpy and tired
when we don't get enough sleep.

Americans
have the dubious privilege
of working the longest hours
in the industrialized world,
and we have among the most parsimonious of provisions

for vacation and other leave.
Each September
we celebrate Labor Day
and the labor movement that gave us the eight hour
working day;
the irony is
that working hours have crept upwards through the last century,
and the average full time worker
now works
47 hours per week -
and many are expected to be available by phone or email
even longer.

And we also play hard.
We schedule our time off,
squeezing in the gym
and housework
and running our kids
to various activities,
and barely stopping
long enough to breathe.

Even in retirement
I hear people say
that they are busier
than ever
as if that is
some sort of badge
of pride.

We are addicted
to busyness.

“It is in vain,” says the psalmist
“that you rise so early and go to bed so late;
vain, too, to eat the bread of toil,
for he gives to his beloved sleep.”

Meanwhile, research suggests
that those working a fifty-five hour week

face a thirty-three percent increased risk of stroke
compared with those working a thirty-five to forty hour week,
and a thirteen percent increased risk of coronary heart disease.
And additional hours on-call
have been found to be associated with severe fatigue and poor mental and physical
health.

And when we hear stories like the businesses in Sweden
who have offered their employees
a six hour working day
for the same money, and found
that efficiency and productivity have risen,
and absences and turnover have dropped,
we dismiss them saying,
“It wouldn’t work here.”

We’re addicted
to busyness.
And busyness
is taking its toll.

“It is in vain that you rise so early and go to bed so late;
vain, too, to eat the bread of toil,
for he gives to his beloved sleep.”

And busyness
is taking its toll
in other ways.
This week
there has been a discussion on the clergy email list
that I belong to,
about how attendance at church
has been lower than average this year.
You might not know
that we are required to keep a record of our attendance each Sunday, and we can compare
it
with other years.
And as we look at the numbers,
and think through who has been around,
what many of us have noticed

is that where once the vast majority of people who attended church
came every week,
now it's more like three weeks in four,
or two in three, or even one in two.
It's not that we have fewer members;
it's just that they're around less often.

And there are all sorts of reasons for the lower average numbers.

One

is the horrible winter we had,
six weeks of Sunday morning
ice and snow,
injuries and fears of injuries
that kept a lot of us
home.

Another

is ill health,
or family pressures.

And another

is sports scheduled on Sundays.

But I suspect the biggest reason is
that we are just too busy.

And sometimes

we just don't have the energy to get up early one more time
and come to church.

We're addicted

to busyness.

And it's killing us.

“It is in vain that you rise so early and go to bed so late;
vain, too, to eat the bread of toil,
for he gives to his beloved sleep.”

Two and a half thousand years ago,
give or take a couple of centuries,
a psalmist wrote these words.

And they were part of a larger psalm,
a psalm that describes
the place of God

in everyday life.

Unless the LORD builds the house, *
their labor is in vain who build it.

Unless the LORD watches over the city, *
in vain the watchman keeps his vigil.

It is in vain that you rise so early and go to bed so late; *
vain, too, to eat the bread of toil,
for he gives to his beloved sleep.

It doesn't matter
what we do;
without God
it's pointless.

Those are pretty strong words, aren't they?
Don't bother
building your house,
don't bother
guarding your city,
Don't bother
getting up early to work.
Without God
there's no point.

Jesu puts it a little more gently.

‘Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? Therefore do not worry, saying, “What will we eat?” or “What will we drink?” or “What will we wear?” For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

But either way, whether it's the psalmist
or Jesus,
the message is the same.
Put God first.
The rest will follow.

That's the reasoning
behind the idea of the sabbath.

You remember the commandment, number three or four, depending on how you number them.

“Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.”

And behind the commandment
is the story of creation.

For six days
God created
and then God rested.

If God can rest,
so can we.
For people who are addicted to busyness,
the sabbath
is permission
to rest,
permission to rest
and to focus
on God.

But just in case you're thinking,
wasn't the sabbath
for Jews,
remember
that the early Christians
continued to keep the sabbath
as a day of rest.

Then they added to it
a celebration of the day of resurrection,
the day after the sabbath, that is, Sunday.

It was a Sunday
when Jesus rose,
a Sunday
when he appeared again to his disciples.

And so Sunday became the focus
of Christian
worship.

And as more and more people came to Christianity from faiths other than Judaism,
the two were combined,
Sabbath and resurrection worship,
and so Sunday became the day of rest for Christians,
the day dedicated
to our God and Savior.

And that's why, quoting from the book of Acts,
our baptismal covenant asks,
"Will you continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and
in the prayers?"

We're addicted to busyness.
And there is an antidote.
That antidote
is God.

And that's why
I'm really glad
that you're all here today,
here,
taking time
to stop
and to worship God.

Keep making that choice.
Keep resting.
Keep praying.
Keep worshipping.

“Because it is in vain that we rise so early and go to bed so late;
vain, too, to eat the bread of toil,
for God gives to his beloved sleep.”
Amen.