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Year A Proper 9
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Matthew 11: 1-7a, 16-19, 25-30

This week, one of my Facebook friends posted an image of a sweatshirt she had just bought.

In big capital letters, the words "JESUS TOOK NAPS" were printed in bright white,

And then below it, in slightly smaller letters "Be like Jesus."ⁱ

Of course, all of the perpetually-sleep-deprived seminarians and graduate students were *very* excited about this sweatshirt, and the message it contains.

And I'm sure many of you are as well.

(The kids, maybe not so much).

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus promises rest to all of the weary and heavy-laden.

And this sounds so nice to those of us who are worn out and tired by jobs that follow us home,

By to-do lists that just get longer and longer,

And by a 24-hour news cycle that seems to get more overwhelming and more complicated with every passing second.

Wouldn't it be lovely if Jesus's call to us was to turn off our cell phones, take that vacation, and get some good sleep?

Especially when you consider the Gospel readings we've heard recently,

In which Jesus warned his disciples that they will be maligned for following him,

Exclaimed that he came not to bring peace to the earth, but a sword,

And call all that would follow him to lose their lives,ⁱⁱ

It seems like in today's reading, Jesus has completely changed his mind about how hard following him will be.

After all, "his yoke is easy and his burden is light," he tells us,

He has revealed God's wisdom to infants, the youngest and least experienced among us.

And, it seems like if we could just forget about all of that other stuff,

We could have a Gospel of relaxation and napping pulled from these bits of Matthew.

Unfortunately, however, immediately after promising this rest, Jesus tells his listeners to put on a yoke and get to work.

We don't talk about yokes much nowadays, but Jesus's listeners would have immediately thought of the wooden or metal bar

Fitted around the neck and shoulders of an oxen or a donkey

And used to join two of them together so they could pull a load or a plow.

Yokes were used for hard labor, for jobs that humans couldn't do themselves.

Because they were so common, yokes were also often used as metaphors, and Jesus's listeners would have had at least two of these in mind.

First, the work of wisdom.

Religious leaders of Jesus's day often talked about the work of learning to follow God's law and the Scriptures, as taking the yoke of wisdom upon oneself.

In Sirach, God's wisdom invites her listeners to take her on her yoke and learn her ways.

Of course, this task was difficult and burdensome.

Later on in Matthew, Jesus will criticize some of the religious leaders for tying up "heavy burdens, hard to bear" and placing them on the shoulders of the people,

And what he has in mind are the ways in which sometimes religious expectations can get in the way of truly knowing God.ⁱⁱⁱ

By proclaiming his own yoke, one with light burdens, and calling the weary to take it on,

Jesus is inviting the crowds to learn God's wisdom from him,

Because, as he states in his response to the people, he is God's wisdom, vindicated by his deeds of helping the blind to see, the sick to be healed, and the dead to be raised.

And secondly, Jesus is also playing on the fact that yokes are used throughout Scripture as metaphors for oppression.^{iv}

The prophet Isaiah states that "the yoke of the burden, the bar across the shoulders" of the people of Israel is "the rod of their oppressor."^v

In Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and some of the other prophetic books,

God promises to break that yoke, and deliver them from the empire which occupied their homeland, placed them under foreign rule, and sometimes drove them into exile.

When John the Baptist asks from prison "Are you the one who is to come?"

He's asking if Jesus will be the one to free the people.

John has lost everything, and is wondering if that was all in vain, if he was somehow mistaken.

But when Jesus responds to the crowd who has heard John's question,

And wondered with John when they would be delivered,

By speaking of a new yoke, even one that's given by someone gentle and humble,

I'm guessing that they were frustrated.

In this proclamation, Jesus invites his listeners to learn a new way of being in the world.

One that is not beholden to the logics and standards of unjust social and economic structures,

But one that upends them, and proclaims good news to the poor,

The sick,

The disabled,

The weary,

The over-worked,

And the marginalized.^{vi}

It is God's wisdom to do things in this way, Jesus says in his prayer.

It is God's gracious will that the fullness of wisdom belongs not to the elites,

But to the infants, some of the most vulnerable among us.

He knows that the burdens which we shoulder are not given to us by God,

They are not part of God's will and intention for the world,

But have been given to us by each other.

Through the systems that we have created and continue to uphold,

Through our deliberate action and through our inaction,

Through our continual willingness to designate some people "other,"

Through oppressive and heavy religious teachings.

And we need to learn to live differently, with God's help, so that we can lift them.

I think we all need this message, in some form or another.

Just looking at the news this week, we can see how even in our own day, we see similar forms of marginalization and religious othering:

From Supreme Court case where the main argument is "God wouldn't make a cake for a gay wedding,"

To a proposed healthcare bill that would literally mean death for the sick, disabled, and poor in our midst and in our country,

To continuing callousness towards the plight of immigrants and refugees seeking safety,

And many more examples that I don't have time to name.

The forms of injustice that Jesus works to counter in the first century are alive and well in our own day and age.

And I think it's fair to say that no matter where we stand on the scale of oppressor/oppressed, We've all been shaped through our life and formation in a society marked by these injustices, And that we need God's help to learn to live anew.

But Jesus also recognizes that religion itself can sometimes be a burden,

That it has prevented people from seeing him for who he is,

As John's expectations for the Messiah made him question, understandably so, in prison, did,

And as the larger public has reacted to both him, and to John.

I'm sure that many of you have been part of religious systems that felt like heavy burdens,

That taught you that you were never good enough,

That God was always angry or judgmental, keeping track of everything you'd done wrong.

And Jesus's message about being weary and heavy-laden is for you, too,

Because the last thing Jesus wants is to institute new forms of oppression in the name of God.

A famous New Testament scholar used to say that "Jesus means freedom," and that's not a bad way of looking at our readings for today.

Jesus wants to bring freedom from things that have distorted our conception of God,

From othering,

From unjust social structures that render some people unworthy of care and attention, and makes some unable to provide for their basic needs.

God is in the business of turning this world upside down, of upending expectations and creating new things.

This is God's gracious will – to institute new ways of being – Jesus says in his prayer.

And it is in the remaking of the world, the new creation we sang about in our opening hymn,

That we will find rest.

In the midst of all of this unrest, the reversal of everything we have learned to expect and to imagine,

Jesus declares "you will find rest for your souls."

This rest is not some psychological state of zen or calm,

Where properly following Jesus in the right way means that one's illness, income, religious formation, or place on the margins somehow no longer affects one's life.

But it's deeper because it is the undoing of our burdens

As we live into God's kingdom, and God's will of justice and peace for the world and for our lives.

It's not a temporary release from our burdens or the ability to ignore them for a while, like a vacation or a nap,

But it is the promise of God's righteousness and peace to all.

If this still sounds like too much to handle, or too much change, I suggest we take our comfort in the yoke, and Jesus's invitation for all to come to him.

Jesus's call to us, as individuals and as a community, is to learn, one step at a time,

How to live differently.

Yoked to Jesus, we are not given a list of rules, or set of tasks to do,

But a relationship with one who is gentle, humble in heart,

And to whom all a power and authority has been given.

Jesus, who eats with the tax collectors and sinners, who shrugs off the social conventions that renders some people other, calls us to join all who are weary,

To be fed around a table that's big enough for all,

And to be made new.

He thinks we can do it.

Wisdom never calls the unready or the unworthy to herself.

And while there is still definitely room and time for naps along the way,

Ultimately we're promised something better.

The rest comes with God's justice, and the peace that comes with knowing Jesus deeply and intimately.

Amen

ⁱ <https://www.memesforjesus.com/collections/apparel/products/jesus-took-naps?variant=28186882059>

ⁱⁱ Matthew 10:16-39.

iii Matthew 23:4

iv *Matthew on the Margins*, 260.

v Isaiah 9:4.

vi *Matthew on the Margins*, 259.