

Albany Presbyterian Church

July 5th 2026, Matthew 11:25-30, Zechariah 9: 9-12 Come, Learn, Rest

Today we read from Matthew 11:28-30, one of the verses many of us adore: "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."

This verse comes in the context of chapter 11 of Matthew's gospel, where Jesus, after sending his disciples, also goes into the towns of Galilee to preach and teach.

From what Jesus says later in the same chapter, we know that his ministry was not going well. He expressed his frustration with the cities of Korazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum on the Sea of Galilee, where he spent most of his ministry. Jesus faced opposition, hostility, and even indifference. So much so that he denounces these towns, saying "Woe to you, Korazin, Woe to you, Bethsaida", and even compares them to the pagan cities like Tyre and Sidon, and to Sodom and Gomorrah, which were condemned in the past for their evil ways, idolatry, violence towards God's people, and paganism. Cities of Baal and Queen Jezebel, who persecuted Elijah and other prophets of God.

Also, in Matthew 10, John the Baptist, already in prison, sends his disciples to Jesus. Unsure about Jesus, he asks what he has heard from others while in prison, full of uncertainty and doubt, "Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?" Of course, he has not seen Jesus in action. After his baptism, Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness. By the time Jesus began his ministry, John had already been arrested and imprisoned. And perhaps Jesus and his quiet, humble ministry weren't quite what he expected; John could also have expected a completely different Messiah.

But then no one knew what to expect. It seems.

John was the first prophet of Israel in a long time. There is a gap of 400 years between the last prophet, Malachi (400-430BCE), and John. This period is known as the intertestamental period, or the silent years.

For 700 years, there was no Kingdom of Israel or Kingdom of Judah. They were colonised by various empires and powers, including Babylonia for about 50 years, Persia for 200 years, the Macedonians and the Greek Empire for 250 years, and the Romans, who ruled for 270 years. Though there were brief periods of independence after the Maccabean Revolt, lasting 77 years from 140 BCE, they remained deeply divided. There were prophets through whom God spoke before the exile, including Jonah, Amos, and Hosea; Isaiah, Micah, Jeremiah, Habakkuk, Daniel, and Obadiah; and after the exile, including Ezekiel, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi, Joel, and Zephaniah, all of whom spoke not only of the exile but also of the coming of the Messiah. In Zechariah, from chapter 9, we read this morning. A prophet known for the measuring yard because part of what he prophesied was the return from exile and the rebuilding of the temple. He was also the one who prophesied the coming of the Messiah riding on a donkey in the story of Jesus's entry into Jerusalem.

Because of John, the kingdom of heaven has been advancing forcefully, and people are believing more because of his message (verse 12). Jesus says, "No prophet is greater than John; indeed, among all who were born, no one is greater than John." He also says John is as great as Elijah himself (verse 14).

"Go back and report to John what you hear and see: the blind receive sight, the lame walk, those with leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor." Echoing the voice of the prophet Isaiah, this is proof of the fulfilment of all the prophets and testifies that Jesus is the expected Messiah.

Yet there was no genuine repentance in Korazin, Bethsaida, or Capernaum; they rejected John for not eating or drinking, and Jesus for eating and drinking. Even after witnessing the power of God in Jesus, they did not turn

to God, repent of their sins, or change their ways. Jesus says they were like children sitting in the marketplace, playing the flute and singing a dirge, a sad song. No one responds to the dance or the cry; no one cares.

Martin Hengel, a professor of religious studies, wrote in his book "Judaism and Hellenism" that not only did they become fluent in the language and meet more often in the local synagogue than the temple, but there was also a major shift in their culture and religion. They moved from strict traditionalism to a more analytical and pluralistic approach, which led to ideological divisions and the rise of distinct religious sects such as the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes. They created the oral Torah, building a protective fence around the written commandments. There were also purity laws, kosher dietary restrictions, tithing, rules for what to do and what not to do, and rules for keeping the Sabbath. There were also observances of religious festivals, and all the laws to ensure strict separation from pagan culture and religious influences. They were burdened by these, with no relief or rest from them. The more you know about the law, the heavier your obligation gets. Perhaps that is why Jesus says the wise and learned will find it hard to hear what Jesus offers and to see who Jesus is amid the overly crowded lives they lead.

To this, Jesus came to teach how to love, to love God and love one another, which is at the core of what the Torah says, what was at the heart of God's command, as in Micah 6:8, What does the Lord require of you? To act justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.

And so, Jesus says, "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." And the image is so vivid.

A yoke is a wooden crossbar used to join two draft animals; it can also be a piece of clothing worn over the shoulders to harness or combine things. This image was used symbolically in Jesus' day as a rabbi's yoke, signifying submission to his teachings and way of life and to becoming his disciple. Jesus invites us to his discipleship, to his yoke gentle and humble, and his teachings easy and light, no pressure of laws and no countless obligations; after all, the life of following Jesus means leaving everything behind and carrying nothing extra. Only the Son knows the Father, and only the Son will be able to give the knowledge of who God is to whoever he chooses. The knowledge of God sets us free and gives us rest and eternal peace. Only in Jesus is there true rest; in him, our souls can rest. So, Jesus says Come,

To the people who refused to believe and repent, who remain unchanged and unmoved. The people of Korazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum, whose shoulders were already heavy with rules and obligations, and whose lives were already burdened by the pressure to preserve their lives, their identities, and the expectations of their society, culture, and religion. To all those who are skeptical and weary.

Secondly, to the prophets, like John the Baptist, who carried 400 years of silence on his shoulders, to the disciples, and to all future disciples, to all who feel a sense of failure to turn people's hearts and minds to repentance and faith. For all those who feel disappointed by unfulfilled expectations and aspirations, and for all the unanswered prayers.

Finally, to everyone—those seeking God, those searching for truth, and yearning for what is right; Peace and rest for our souls, to all who are weary and worn from the life we lead. To you, to me... Jesus calls us to come, learn, and find rest. Thanks be to God. Amen.