

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

(January 5, 2020)

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Sermon manuscript

New Year's Equipping Message

A New Year's "Next Step" into God's Rest

(Hebrews 3; Numbers 13-14)

Introduction: Restless rest...

The beginning of a new year. It's a time to launch and to initiate, to engage and to act. January 1st invites us to take life by the horns and get to work.

Eat healthy. Lose weight. Get fit. Cut down on screen time. Read that book you've been meaning to get to. Clean the garage. Call that friend. Save money. Quit smoking. Organize the sock drawer. Learn a new skill. Start a hobby. Plant a garden. Set up a budget.

Now, if you've been busying yourself with all that over the last five days, you're tired. You need some rest. And a good time of rest is not to be despised. Rest is important.

People who study these things tell us that if we don't get the rest and the sleep we should (and we often don't!), we'll pay a price in a loss of health and even longevity.

So, yes, sometimes, even in the midst of resolving New Year's resolutions, taking a mid-afternoon nap is exactly what you should do. Sometimes, doing exactly nothing is just what the doctor would order. We need to rest.

But what rest do we choose. Some "rests" leave us restless. It's possible to opt for a rest that doesn't refresh.

Today, I want to think with you about rest. It may seem out of synch with the calendar to think about rest on January 5th. This should be a day to hit it hard, pedal to the metal. This isn't the day to consider resting. Except, it is.

You and I are here today because we want to take "next steps" with Jesus in 2020.

No matter where you are in your journey with God, you want to learn more about Jesus, get better acquainted with Him, grow in faith and in obedience.

I've got just the thing for you.

When the author of the Bible book we call *Hebrews* sat down to write to people who were also interested in growing in Jesus, he wrote to them about "rest."

But, by "rest" he didn't mean idleness or inactivity. He wasn't writing about laziness, but about a life-giving rest only God can give.

The rest that God offers is a true rest. It is more refreshing than a January week in Cancun. It's more restful than hours spent in front of any screen.

It's a rest found only in Jesus. It's a rest that gives rest to restless souls. It's a rest that energizes. We're going to explore that rest as we turn to Hebrews now.

Background to Hebrews...

This book was written in the first century AD to encourage Jewish Christians who were suffering persecution for their faith to keep standing firm in Jesus.¹

¹ Hebrews was written to Jewish believers in Jesus who were being tempted to return to orthodox Judaism and leave the fold of Christianity to avoid persecution. This letter is to encourage these believers to press on in obedience to Christ - no matter what the cost, because of the greatness of what He has done for them.

There were outside forces tempting them to walk away from Jesus, to revert to a safer, simpler life in a familiar Judaism.

The author (and we don't know who wrote Hebrews) urged them to resist those temptations. Follow Jesus. No turning back.

His letter is arranged around four, increasingly severe, *warning* passages. We find the second of these warnings in chapter 3.²

The beginning of Hebrews 3 (vv. 1-6) establishes that the way of Jesus (the gospel of grace) is superior to the way of Moses (law). He urges, "*Stick with Jesus and don't go back to Moses.*"

And then comes the warning to any of them - or us - who are tempted to not keep following Jesus.

He warns his readers to not adopt some deadly attitudes that often tempt Jesus-followers.

For instance, we are not to harden our hearts.

Deadly Attitudes to Avoid (Hebrews 3:7-11)

Hardening of the Heart (v. 8)

[8] DO NOT HARDEN YOUR HEARTS AS WHEN THEY PROVOKED ME, AS IN THE DAY OF TRIAL IN THE WILDERNESS,

Think of the clay that the potter shapes into something useful and beautiful. As long as the clay is pliable, he can mold it into anything he desires. But let the clay go dry and it will harden. He can't do anything with it.

You and I are responsible for the condition of our hearts. We are to keep our hearts soft, pliable, responsive to Him. We are to always be eager for God's shaping and molding so that we are becoming what He wants us to be.

Don't harden your heart. And don't put God to the test.

Testing God (v. 9)

[9] WHERE YOUR FATHERS TRIED ME BY TESTING ME, AND SAW MY WORKS FOR FORTY YEARS.

Kids put moms and dads to the test all the time. They push limits and test boundaries. To borrow from the previous verse, they "provoke" their parents.

You are a child of God and He is the perfect Father. When God puts a fence in front of you, don't lean against it, climb it to see the other side, or dig under it.

Respect it. It's there to protect you against what's on the other side.

Don't provoke or test or try your Heavenly Father. And don't go wandering astray from God's ways.

Going Astray in Your Heart (v. 10)

[10] "THEREFORE I WAS ANGRY WITH THIS GENERATION, AND SAID, 'THEY ALWAYS GO ASTRAY IN THEIR HEART, AND THEY DID NOT KNOW MY WAYS';

When I take my dog on a walk in the woods, I may take her off leash for a bit. In the woods she can't get into too much trouble. But on the neighborhood streets, I always keep her on the leash.

In dog years, Scout's a little older than I am, but less wise. Dogs are perennial two-year-olds. They don't know enough to keep out of trouble. If she's not on the leash she'll go astray, right into traffic.

You're not a two-year-old and God doesn't keep you on a leash. He expects you to stay right beside Him. It's wise and it's safe for you and me to "heel" to God.

We are to be (1) soft and pliable in the Lord's hands, careful to (2) not put Him to the test as we (3) follow closely wherever He leads.

We are to avoid deadly attitudes that an entire generation of people adopted, fifteen centuries before Hebrews was written.

² The other warning passages are found in chapters 2, 6, and 10.

They violated all of the warnings and God dealt with them severely. His severity is seen in that He did not allow them to enter His “*rest*.” (Hebrews 3:11)

He is thinking of the generation that came out of Egypt under Moses’ leadership. Let’s review their story now, turning our attention to the Old Testament.

When God’s People did NOT Avoid them (Numbers 13-14)

God Pours Out His Grace on His People (Exodus)

When Jacob’s family moved to Egypt to escape a deadly famine in their homeland of Canaan, they didn’t know that they would be staying in Egypt four hundred years, or that their lives would become miserable, or that they would be enslaved - but that is exactly what happened.

They lived in Egypt until Moses, their deliverer, led them out of Egypt after the Egyptians had endured ten wasting plagues.

The Jews walked across the dry Red Sea bed to safety on the other side. And then, when the Egyptian army pursued, intending to re-enslave or kill them, the waters came back over the Egyptians.

Israel was saved! They were now God’s redeemed people.

Going forward into the desert, God met their need for food with a daily provision of manna. He led them from the Red Sea, north, with a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night, all the way to Mount Sinai where they received the Law.

And the next stop? The Promised Land of Canaan.

They marched through the desert to a place called Kadesh-barnea, poised to enter the land God had promised Abraham and his descendants centuries earlier.

We enter the action as Moses commissions twelve men to leave the Jewish camp and travel into Canaan to “spy” out the land.³

God Allows His People to Explore His Good Gift (Numbers 13:1-20)

Twelve spies (vv. 1-16)

[2] “Send out for yourself men so that they may spy out the land of Canaan, which I am going to give to the sons of Israel; you shall send a man from each of their fathers’ tribes⁴, every one a leader among them.”

You’ll note here the purpose for this mission. These men were not sent out to decide if they should take the land. The land was to be theirs. The mission was reconnaissance.

The details of this mission are given in Numbers 13:17-20, which I’ll recap.⁵

Reconnaissance (vv. 17-20)

They were to travel north from Kadesh into the region of southern Canaan (the Negev).⁶ From there, they were to continue going north into the Hill Country of the land.

³ All twelve of these spies are named in Numbers 13:2-16.

⁴ You may have noticed in reading through the list that one of the tribes, Levi, was not mentioned. That omission is not unusual. Frequently, in the listing of the twelve tribes, Levi is omitted. As the priestly tribe, Levi’s descendants belonged to the Lord in a special way. So, another “twelfth tribe” was formed by dividing the one tribe of Joseph into two, made up of Joseph’s sons, Ephraim and Manasseh.

⁵ [17] *When Moses sent them to spy out the land of Canaan, he said to them, “Go up there into the Negev; then go up into the hill country. [18] “See what the land is like, and whether the people who live in it are strong or weak, whether they are few or many. [19] “How is the land in which they live, is it good or bad? And how are the cities in which they live, are they like open camps or with fortifications? [20] “How is the land, is it fat or lean? Are there trees in it or not? Make an effort then to get some of the fruit of the land.” Now the time was the time of the first ripe grapes.*

⁶ “The Negev” was the generic term given to the southern section of the land of Palestine, a dry area unsuitable for irrigation and agriculture.

As they followed this route, the twelve spies were to observe and collect data.

Now, remember, none of the Jews in the days of Moses knew the first thing about Canaan. Four centuries earlier Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob had all lived there. But none of the people with Moses had ever even seen it.

These spies were to make notes about the people groups living in Canaan. Observe their military strength and preparedness. They were also to report on the land itself. Was it fit for agriculture, for livestock? Was it flat, hilly, mountainous, fertile, well-watered with streams?⁷

Moses wanted the twelve spies to put on a “*show-off and tell*” display for all the Jews back at camp when they returned so that everybody would be excited about the good land God was giving them.⁸

So, the spies left friends and loved ones, left the safety of the wilderness encampment guarded by the pillar of cloud and fire, left Kadesh-barnea, and set out to explore the land of promise.

After forty days of exploration and spying, they returned with a report of all they had seen and experienced.

The People Respond to God’s Gift (Numbers 13:25--14:10)

Majority report (13:27-29)

Sites seen (vv. 21-22)

The odd-sounding names they included in their report - the wilderness of Zin, Rehob, Lebo-hamath - are geographic waypoints.

⁷ They were obviously planning on destroying the cities, so it was important to determine whether those cities were capable of withstanding assault. Were these cities of the type that had high walls around them (like Jericho) or were they defended by vigilant watchmen on the perimeter of the camp?

⁸ Again, notice. The spies’ trip was not to find out if the land was worth fighting for. It was to *convince* them that the land *was* worth fighting for.

They tell us that the spies bisected the land of Canaan as they fulfilled their mandate. They had been sent out to explore the land - and explore it they did.

- They saw the hill country region.
- They saw the Jordan River valley.
- They saw the coast of the Mediterranean.
- They saw the fertile land of Galilee and the beautiful Sea of Galilee.

Mention is made of the descendants of Anak. These guys were noteworthy because of their physical size. They were BIG!⁹

Bounty of the land (vv. 23-24)

As they had been instructed, while they were in Canaan, they sampled the land’s goodness and brought some of it back to the camp at Kadesh to prove the land’s bounty.

To impress their fellow Jews, they carried a single cluster of grapes so big that it had to be carried on a pole between two men, along with other fruit from the land.

Once back at camp, the spies gave their report about the land and its potential.

Raving review of the Promised Land...

It was a very positive report. For forty days they had been traipsing around in Canaan. They saw the whole land.

And Canaan was a good land. But, if you listen to their report carefully, you’ll hear them referring to the Promised Land in a somewhat detached way.

[27] Thus they told him, and said, “We went in to the land where YOU (emphasis added) sent us; and it certainly does flow with milk and honey, and this is its fruit.”

⁹ A few hundred years later, a young shepherd boy (David) would battle one of the sons of Anak, a Philistine from Gath named Goliath.

Almost without exception, when Canaan has been mentioned up to this point, it is referred to as *“the land which the Lord swore to give to us.”* Now, it is *“the land where YOU* (i.e. - Moses) *sent us.”*

I believe that change is significant. I think the spies were now, post-spy mission, more focused on Moses than on God, as their next comments prove.

...but we can't take the land (vv. 28-29, 32-33)

[28] “Nevertheless, the people who live in the land are strong, and the cities are fortified and very large; and moreover, we saw the descendants of Anak there. [29] Amalek is living in the land of the Negev and the Hittites and the Jebusites and the Amorites are living in the hill country, and the Canaanites are living by the sea and by the side of the Jordan.”

The cities are an obstacle and so are some of the tribes that inhabit the land.

- There are the very big sons of Anak.
- There are the Hittites, a very advanced and militarily strong civilization.¹⁰
- The Amalekites were there, too - a warlike Bedouin people, living on the southern borders of Canaan and in the Sinai Peninsula.
- And there are the other tribes, too, all known for their violence and idolatry.

We can feel the spies' terror and the people's growing panic. The message behind the message of the good land is - *“No way.”*

[31] But the men who had gone up with him said, “We are not able to go up against the people, for they are too strong for us.” [32] So they gave out to the sons of Israel a bad report of the land which they had spied out, saying, “The land through which we have gone, in spying it out, is a land that devours its inhabitants; and all the people whom we saw in it are men of great size.”

¹⁰ Their main stomping grounds were in Asia Minor, to the north of Canaan. But by this time, we know that their influence had extended into Palestine.

[33] “There also we saw the Nephilim¹¹ (the sons of Anak are part of the Nephilim); and we became like grasshoppers in our own sight, and so we were in their sight.”

The spies' words give us a pathetic commentary on the state of their hearts.

They had allowed their **hearts to harden**. They **tried** and **tested** the Lord with their rejection. They **provoked** Him, and they **wandered astray**.

They spoke as if they had been sent on this recon mission to determine IF they should take the land or not. But that had not been their assignment. They were the eyes of the mission, not the brains.

What they were doing would be like us here, today, holding a congregational vote after church to decide if we should obey the Great Commission - but that's not our call to make!

And these Jewish spies decided that they didn't have to do what God commanded because the Canaanites were big.

Of course, there was, accompanying this report of the ten, a minority report, courtesy of two of the spies: Caleb and Joshua.

Minority report (v. 30)

Caleb was the spokesman: ***[13:30]...“We should by all means go up and take possession of it, for we will surely overcome it.”***

“Don't listen to the others. This is not Mission: Impossible. With God, it is completely possible. Hard, but possible. We can do this thing. We can take the land.”

And, no. Caleb wasn't looking at the land of Canaan through rose-colored glasses. He saw the difficulties and the big Anakim and the walled cities and hostile tribes just like the other ten had.

¹¹ Nephilim - the demi-gods who lived on the earth before the flood (Gen. 6:4)

But he - and Joshua - saw past the problems to God's command and to God's promise.

Tragically, though, the minority report was rejected by those who said that only fools would try to take this land.¹²

And the final response of the people shows them choosing anything but Canaan, anything but the land God wanted to give them.

The "No's" cry out, "Back to Egypt!" (14:1-4)

[Numbers 14:2] And all the sons of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron; and the whole congregation said to them, "Would that we had died in the land of Egypt. Or would that we had died in this wilderness. [3] Why is the Lord bringing us into this land, to fall by the sword? Our wives and our little ones will become plunder; would it not be better for us to return to Egypt?" [4] So they said to one another, "Let us appoint a leader and return to Egypt."

In previous grumbings, the rebels had looked back longingly at Egypt. Here they actually make plans to return there.

This was the refusal of God's people to accept God's gracious provision of the Promised Land.¹³

Not surprisingly, God's perfectly severe judgment falls.

God Punishes His People with Restlessness (14:11ff...)

[22] "Surely all the men who have seen My glory and My signs which I performed in Egypt and in the wilderness, yet have put Me to the test these ten times and have not listened to My voice, [23] shall by no means see the land which I swore to their fathers, nor shall any of those who spurned Me see it..."

¹² Someone has counted and discovered that the Jews' grumbling misbehavior at Kadesh was the tenth time since having left Egypt.

¹³ With hard hearts and stiff necks, they said, "No!" and came near to stoning Caleb and Joshua to death. (v. 10)

[34] According to the number of days which you spied out the land, forty days, for every day you shall bear your guilt a year, even forty years, and you will know My opposition."

They refused God's gift of the land. Now, they are prohibited from entering the land.

The spies had been in Canaan for forty days. They will now all spend one year in the desert for every day of the mission.

That whole generation will die in the desert.

Or, as the book of Hebrews puts it when making reference to the Kadesh-barnea incident, they did not enter God's "rest."

Conclusion:

Restful rest in Canaan...

On the one hand, we understand that entering the Promised Land would have been great, and restful.

There were the mountains and hills and lush pastures of northern Galilee, the streams of the Judean hills and the fertile plains as you move toward the Mediterranean coast.

Images of those scenes are peaceful, restful. The land would have been delightful and filled with blessings.

On the other hand, there is irony in the use of the word "rest" to describe the Jews' entrance into Canaan.

When, forty years later, Joshua and the people entered Canaan, they met with serious opposition and daunting challenges.

Violent, idolatrous tribes wanted to destroy them. The Jews had work to do in settling the land, dividing the land among the families of Israel, preparing for farming, and pasturing livestock.

There was the work of building a God-honoring society based on God's ways. There was the political work of developing the cultural infrastructure to hold the Jews together.

All of this was involved in crossing the Jordan River to enter Canaan. None of it sounds restful, like lying on a beach sounds restful. But the Bible terms the activity involved in carrying out God's mission "**rest**".

There is "*soul rest*" in doing what God gives us to do.

In the book of Hebrews, "**rest**" is the summary term that describes the overall experience God's people would have had if they had **believed** His promise and **obeyed** His command.

It's also the word Jesus used to describe a life of following Him.

Restful rest in serving Jesus...

[Matthew 11:28] "Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest."

And we're tempted to think, "*Great. I could use a break.*"

Life with Jesus sounds like sitting in an easy chair until we listen to what else He has to say about "**coming to Him.**"

[29] 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. [30] For My yoke is easy and My burden is light."

A "yoke" is that heavy wooden bar that links two oxen together while they do their work.

The *rest* Jesus is promising isn't a *rest* of inactivity. It's the *soulful rest* of engaging in meaningful work with Him and for Him.

We are "**weary**" and "**heavy-laden**" when we give ourselves to pseudo-rests that don't refresh.

Surfing the web doesn't energize and neither does over-drinking. Binging on junk food or favorite shows or porn won't give the rest Jesus promises. Great movies and a Night In Old San Antonio and days at Sea World are wonderful, but they won't give rest to your soul.

But the risky and exhausting work of taking the land of Canaan would have given the Old Testament Jews the rest their souls needed. And yoking up with Jesus to carry out the Great Commission will do the trick for us.

That's why the author of Hebrews also says, ***[4:11] Therefore, let us be diligent to enter that rest.***

The possibility exists that any of us might NOT enter God's rest. We might fail as miserably as they did at Kadesh-barnea.

So, since the Christian life is to be a team sport, how about if we all agree to give each other a hand.

That's what Hebrews urges.

God's rest is a team sport...

[3:12] Take care, brethren, that there not be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God. [13] But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is still called "Today," so that none of you will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.

God has provided a tremendous aid for your faith in your friendships with others who are on the same journey. So, nurture friendships with God in the middle.

Deep, meaningful engagement with friends who are traveling toward faith and obedience is God's antidote to rebellion, a cure for faithlessness, and a vital part of the prescription for spiritual vitality.