

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

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The Yoke of Mutual Survival

[Readings](#) [Bulletin](#)

“Come to me,” Jesus says, “all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.” Before we rush past that invitation, I wonder if we can let it meet us honestly. Are you weary?

Not just tired because the week was full or the holiday weekend busy, but weary in your soul? Worn out from trying to keep up? From pretending everything is okay? From feeling like you must be productive, useful, successful, informed, available, and emotionally steady all at the same time? Are you tired of living in a world that measures your value by what you produce, earn, own, endure, or how little help we ask for?

If you are weary, hear the good news first, Jesus is not disappointed in you. Jesus does not stand at a distance waiting for you to get stronger or pull yourself up by your bootstraps. Jesus sees the weight you carry and tells the truth, it is “heavy,” weighing you down, and he says, “Come to me.”

That invitation matters because we have been handed many heavy yokes from the world and told they are freedom. We have been told the good life is self-sufficiency and that if we struggle, it must be because we didn't work or hustle hard enough. This lie keeps us exhausted.

But that is not the voice of Jesus. That is the voice of Empire. Empire needs tired people: too exhausted to imagine another way, too isolated to organize, too ashamed to ask for help, and too busy just getting by to notice who benefits from their exhaustion. Empire tells us that rest is laziness, needing help is failure, and relying on others is weakness.

But Jesus says, “Come to me, all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.” This says that rest is not a luxury or a prize for finishing your tasks. It is not something we earn by proving ourselves. Rest is part of the

gospel. In a world that benefits from our exhaustion, receiving rest and making space for others to rest are acts of holy resistance.

The American Dream, at its best, holds a beautiful hope; that ordinary people can live with dignity, freedom, safety, and opportunity. There is something powerfully kin-dom-adjacent in the phrase “We the People,” a vision of people joined together, whose lives are connected and whose destiny is shared.

This weekend, as fireworks fill the sky and the nation celebrates the 250th anniversary of its independence, we can honor that longing. We can give thanks for every movement, every community, every neighbor, every ancestor, every ordinary person who has tried to widen the meaning of “we.”

But as followers of Jesus, we also must tell the truth. “We the People” has too often been narrowed into “me and mine.” Freedom has been reduced to consumer choice. Independence has become isolation. The common good been sacrificed on the altar of private profit. And the dream of mutual flourishing has been replaced by the nightmare of extreme individualism, exhaustion, and ruthless exploitation.

So today, know that Jesus’ invitation to rest is not a way to avoid reality. It is a challenge to the lie that things have to be this way. “Come to me, all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens.” Come to me, all who are tired of struggling alone. Come to me, all exhausted by the lie that you must save yourself. Come to me, all you who are ready to put down the heavy yoke of domination and take up the yoke of the kin-dom.

But understand that Jesus does not invite us into passivity. He does not say, “Come to me, and you will never carry anything again.” He says, “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me.” So the question is not **if** we will carry a yoke but **whose** yoke we will carry.

Paul, in Romans, gives language to the contradiction inside us and around us: “For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.” This passage is often read as an individual moral struggle, and there is truth in that. We know what it is to want patience and speak harshly anyway, to want courage and stay silent, to proclaim generosity yet cling tightly to what we have.

But Paul is also pointing to something bigger. Sin is not just a list of bad choices; it is a force that affects our bodies, habits, institutions, and thoughts. What Paul calls “the flesh” is not the body itself, as if bodies are bad. They are not. Bodies are beloved. Bodies are where God meets us. Bodies are what Jesus heals, feeds, touches, and takes on in the incarnation.

The flesh, in Paul’s meaning, is the ego focused only on itself. It is the self that seeks power, comfort, and control at the expense of right relationship. That describes not only individuals but nations too.

“For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.” What a devastatingly honest summary of the American experiment. We declared that all people are created equal, then built an economy on enslaved labor. We spoke of liberty then stole Indigenous land. We lifted up the promise of refuge for the tired and poor, yet have so often met them with cages, criminalization, and contempt.

We say we value life while warehousing human beings in prisons, treating poverty like a crime, and targeting trans and queer siblings with cruel legislation. We say we believe in freedom while asking some to pay for it with their bodies, neighborhoods, safety, and silence. This is national cognitive dissonance, the gap between what we say and what we do. Christian faith does not ask us to hide that. Faith gives us courage to tell the truth without losing hope.

Martin Luther compared a theology of glory with a theology of the cross. A theology of glory sees power and calls it righteous. It sees success and calls it a blessing. It sees violence and calls it strength. It looks at the nation and says, “We are innocent, chosen, exceptional. We need never repent.” But a theology of the cross calls a thing what it is. It looks at suffering and asks who is being crucified. It looks at power and asks who is being crushed. It looks at history and refuses to lie.

Such honesty must force us to repentance. But here’s the thing, repentance is not about losing hope. Repentance is hope in action. It means we believe things can change. It means we trust that sin doesn’t have the last word. Grace can reach not just people, but whole communities, churches, systems, and even nations.

To tell the truth about our failures does not mean we hate our neighbors or despise where we live. It means we love truth more than mythology. It means we love our

neighbors enough to try to fix things. It means we love the promise of “We the People” enough to ask why so many have been left out of that “we.”

Paul cries out, “Wretched person that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?” The answer is not to ignore the problem or look back with longing. It’s not about hiding our wounds with a flag. The answer is grace. “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” Grace doesn’t ignore the problem, it makes repentance possible. Grace tells the truth, opens a new future, and breaks the old yoke so we don’t have to keep moving toward death.

Zechariah gives us a picture of that future: “Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey.” On a weekend when this nation celebrates breaking free from a tyrant king, Zechariah points us toward a completely different kind of ruler. Not a king on a warhorse, but a humble king riding on a donkey.

This king doesn’t just come without weapons; this king actively breaks down the tools of war: “He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the warhorse from Jerusalem; and the battle bow shall be cut off.” This is not Empire with a kinder face. This is not control covered in religious words. This is a ruler whose victory looks like disarmament, whose peace is not kept by fear, whose power is not shown by how many enemies are defeated.

Christians cannot hear this passage without remembering Jesus entering Jerusalem on a donkey, subverting the Empire’s parades with the strange and holy theater of humility. Rome had its parades and legions, and its version of peace, the *Pax Romana*, peace maintained by the sword for the benefit of the powerful; peace built on occupied bodies and silenced resistance.

We know something about that. We may not call it Empire, but we know the temptation to enforce a *Pax Americana*, a false peace maintained by overwhelming military might, economic extraction, border violence, police violence, and the threat that anyone who falls behind will be left behind.

But God’s peace is different. Psalm 145 tells us what divine power looks like: “The Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.” “The Lord upholds all who are falling, and raises up all who are bowed down.” God

gives food in due season. God opens the divine hand and satisfies the desire of every living thing.

God's greatness is not shown by crushing the weak. God's kin-dom is not determined by domination. Instead, God's reign is revealed in mercy. In provision. In lifting up those who are bowed down. In collective care, not collective punishment.

This is where rest becomes resistance. If Empire is a machine that consumes people, rest says that bodies are holy and not for consumption. If Empire says people only matter when they produce, rest says our worth comes from God. If Empire says the vulnerable must be sacrificed for efficiency, safety, profit, or national greatness, making space for rest says no one is disposable here.

When we let someone rest, we are resisting Empire. When we feed someone without making them prove they deserve it, we are resisting evil. When we protect time for prayer, rest, grief, joy, sleep, healing, and unhurried friendship, we are resisting the world's powers. When we refuse to run the church like a business, refuse to treat volunteers like machines, and refuse to judge faithfulness only by how busy we are, we are resisting domination.

We are saying with our life together that God's world is not built on extraction. God's kin-dom is built on grace. That is why Jesus says the truth of this kin-dom is hidden from the wise and intelligent and revealed to infants. It is hidden from those who have too much tied to the old way to imagine anything else. Hidden from the elites who explain why there is never enough for the poor, but always enough for war.

But it is revealed to infants. To the small ones. The vulnerable ones. The ones who know they cannot survive alone. The ones who know depending on others is not shameful; it is human. The ones who know life is not a private achievement, but a shared gift.

Empire says: hoard what you can. Jesus says, "Come to the table." Empire says: build higher fences. Jesus says: build longer tables. Empire says: save yourself. Jesus says: take my yoke.

Interesting thing about yokes, they're typically not designed for one animal to pull alone (that'd be a bridle). A yoke is, by its nature, shared. It binds two together so the weight is distributed, so the work can be done together, so one does not bear the whole burden alone.

So when Jesus says, "Take my yoke upon you," he is inviting us out of isolation. The heavy yoke of the American Dream says that your pain is private. Your struggle is your fault. Your neighbor's suffering is not your problem. Need is weakness. Dependence is failure. Community is optional. Rest must be earned.

The yoke of Christ says, come closer. Come closer to God. Come closer to your neighbor. Come learn from the One who is gentle and humble in heart. This is the blue-collar love I spoke of last week: a steady, practical, everyday commitment to showing up, meeting real needs, and doing the hard work of caring for one another even when it costs us something.

Sometimes blue-collar love looks like work. Sometimes it looks like doing the dishes, making the call, showing up, telling the truth, bringing the meal, giving the ride, protecting the vulnerable. And sometimes blue-collar love looks like providing rest. Sometimes it looks like saying, "Sit down. Breathe. I've got this for a while." That, too, is solidarity.

Solidarity says, your survival is tied to mine. I am beside you, getting into the yoke. Solidarity also says, your rest matters to me. Not because you have earned it or produced enough. Your rest matters because you are beloved. Your body matters because God made it. Your joy matters because the kin-dom is not only about surviving harm; it is about tasting the abundant life found in God.

That is the yoke of mutual survival. It is the hard, beautiful work of becoming "We the People" in a deeper, truer, more gospel-shaped way than Empire can ever imagine. It is the work of refusing to let anyone be disposable, building networks of mutual aid and collective care, and standing as a vocal barrier of protection around those targeted by cruelty.

It is also the work of making space for rest. Rest for the single parent. Rest for the overworked teacher. Rest for the caregiver. Rest for the elder. Rest for the child who has had to grow up too fast. Rest for the queer or trans sibling tired of having their dignity debated. Rest for the immigrant neighbor tired of living under

suspicion. Rest for the unhoused neighbor tired of being treated like a problem instead of a person. Rest for the person in recovery. Rest for the person carrying grief. Rest for the person who has been strong for too long. Rest for **you**.

Jesus does not say, "Come to me, all you who have finished everything." Jesus says, "Come to me, all you who are weary." Jesus does not say, "Come to me, and I will make you more efficient." Jesus says, "I will give you rest."

And yes, there is still work to do. There is truth to tell. Repair to seek. Neighbors to protect. There are tables to lengthen. Systems to challenge and courage to practice. But we do this work as people who are loved, not as people trying to earn love. We do this work from grace, not for grace. We do this work yoked to Christ and to one another, not alone.

So how can Jesus call this yoke easy? How can he say this burden is light? Not because it costs nothing, nor because discipleship is effortless. The burden is light because we were never meant to carry it alone. The yoke is easy because Christ is with us in it. The rest Jesus promises is not the rest of escape, pretending, or numbing ourselves while the world burns. It is rest for our souls.

The rest that comes when we stop trying to earn our worth. The rest that comes when we stop pretending to be self-sufficient is freedom. The rest that comes when we stop pulling the weight of the world alone and discover God has placed us in a body, a community, a people, a creation woven together by grace.

We can find that rest in the One who comes humbly and riding on a donkey. The One who cuts off the chariot and the warhorse. The One who reveals wisdom to infants. The One who upholds all who are falling. The One who opens his hand to every living thing. The One who says, "Come to me and rest."

So this week, as the fireworks fade and the smoke clears, perhaps the invitation is both simple and difficult: Lay down the yoke that is killing you. Lay down the lie that you have to save yourself. Lay down the myth that your neighbor's suffering is not your concern. Lay down the heresy that power is holiness.

Take up the yoke of Christ. Get beside somebody. Let somebody get beside you. Practice blue-collar love. Invest in ordinary networks of mutual survival. Tell the truth. Protect the vulnerable. Build the longer table.

And rest. Rest as an act of trust. Rest as an act of defiance. Rest as an act of worship. Rest as an act of resistance to every power that says you are only what you produce.

And make room for others to rest, too. Let the weary breathe. Let the grieving move slowly. Let the vulnerable be protected. Let the overburdened be carried. Let the belovedness of God become visible in the way we care for one another.

Christ is in the yoke beside you. Christ is gentle and humble in heart. Christ is teaching us a way of life that Empire cannot understand, and death cannot finally defeat. And when we pull together in that yoke, not for domination, not for profit, not for glory, but for love, the burden becomes light. And weary souls find rest. And the world is transformed by the grace of God. Amen.