

## Invitation

**Exodus 20: 8-11**

**Mark 6:30**

I've become aware of a feeling, and I don't think it's just a feeling in myself. I think I sense it in most of the people I meet these days: it's in the society, the economy, the culture as a whole...the members of the church. It's just a sense of—what?

Fog? Fatigue? World Weariness? Anxiety?

I can't quite put a word on it. But I recall a description from literature that captures it well enough. Bilbo Baggins, in J.R.R. Tolkien's The Fellowship of the Ring says, "Why, I feel all thin.....sort of *stretched*, if you know what I mean: like butter that has been scraped over too much bread.

I've used the image before in a sermon, but it just rings true...many of us share Bilbo's lament: there's only a little bit of me and it has to go so

far...and I feel as if I'm being pulled across a piece of toast by a knife blade: scrape, scrape, scrape.

Now this feeling of being stretched to the limit or of just scraping by can be actually true or emotionally true...or sometimes both. Let me explain the distinction I'm drawing, and I'll do so first in economic terms.

One can be actually stretched too thin in an economic sense when there are simply more bills than money: when there are ten items in the grocery cart and you count your coins and you have to put one item back, no matter what it is...no shampoo this week, I'll wash my hair with a bar of soap.

Or one can be emotionally stretched too thin in an economic sense when a feeling of scarcity begins to take hold. It isn't that there are more bills than money this month, thanks be to God...but EVERY news headline is about a bank failure or a market decline and EVERY radio broadcast is pundits talking about recession and EVERY workplace conversation is about possible layoffs and EVERYWHERE you turn is a sign—going out of business sale, or will work for food.

And even though you're fortunate enough not to BE stretched at the moment, you FEEL stretched. Like every nerve ending is raw, and more of your thoughts are about money than usual, and a routine trip to the grocery store becomes exhaustingly filled with decisions—should I buy the cookies? Well maybe not this week. Do we need orange juice? Or should we just drink water, juice is expensive and water's healthier anyway. Am I willing to pay this much for ground beef? It was 15 cents cheaper last week.

A year ago you filled the cart and paid the bill. Now you take things off the shelf, look at them, and put them back, look at something else, put it back. It's exhausting! Scrape, scrape, scrape.

What is true of money is also true of time. One can actually have too few hours in the day...have two commitments at twelve o'clock on opposite sides of town, or have that experience where your home phone rings and your cell phone rings and your doorbell rings and your child yells "Mom!" all at the same time.

Or one can emotionally feel the pressure of time. It's like having an inbox where everything, no matter what, is marked URGENT. Go to post office: URGENT; pick up dry cleaning: URGENT; doctor's office, URGENT, school car line URGENT, get the oil changed URGENT, dance rehearsal, soccer practice, scout meeting URGENT. My grandmother used to call it being nibbled to death by the ducks. And then your child says, "Oh, I have a science project on volcanoes due tomorrow, I need to build a working scale model of Mount Vesuvius. And you BECOME a working scale model of Mount Vesuvius. Scrape, scrape, scrape.

And what is true of time is true of emotional energy. Sometimes there's not enough of that to go around either. I'm GRIEVING. I can't cope with ANYTHING else. Not the housework, not the bills, not my marriage. Nothing.

My parent is in a nursing home—and fifteen times a day I feel a twinge of guilt or concern. A friend calls to go to lunch—TWINGE, I can't.

It's a beautiful day, I think I'll plant some flowers—TWINGE, I can't.

I don't want to GO today, I can't take the medicine smell and the sense of grief, and the small white room. !!!!!TWINGE!!!!!

And you know what? Twinges are exhausting like push-ups. You reach a point where you cannot take one more. Scrape, scrape, scrape.

Finances—time—emotional resources: it can often feel like there's nothing left. Like you are butter scraped over too much bread.

And then...Sunday morning comes. And you get dressed up. And you come to church. And the stewardship chair is talking about the budget shortfall, and the grounds committee needs help with a workday, and the sermon is filled with a dozen shoulds:

“You should feed the poor and oppose the war and forgive your neighbor, and feel this way about this political issue, and you should repent of this habit and you should take on this discipline”

—do you know why people sit home with the newspaper sometimes? Because so often, “Church” is a part of the scraping. I don’t have any more funds to support the budget right now, I don’t have any more time to serve on committees right now, I don’t have emotional energy to give away to anyone for any reason.

And even Sabbath feels like a “should.” 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.

Several people have told me that whenever I preach a sermon on Sabbath, they feel guilty, because nothing is one more thing that they SHOULD be doing but don’t have time to do.

I read an article many years ago, written by a pastor—older than I, wiser than I. I wish I could recall his name to give him proper credit, or recall the source to provide a proper footnote. It’s been ten years or more though, I simply can’t remember. But I clearly remember the gist of what he said in the article.

He said, my back yard is FILLED with cats. Not just my cats, but all the cats in the neighborhood. One is asleep in the empty birdbath, one is sunning himself on the deck, another on a low tree limb, another by the petunias. And the reason my back yard is filled with cats is because my neighborhood is filled with dogs...and I have a fence.

My back yard is a place of safety—or security—of sanctuary. I wonder, said this older, wiser pastor, if that isn't what the church needs to be, more of the time. A place of welcome. A place of restoration. A place of renewal. A place of sanctuary. I wonder if, sometimes, we should ask nothing...and just let anyone who wishes come in and find rest in God for a while.

When I read the article 10 years ago, I had a dozen rebuttals—what about stewardship? What about mission? What about discipleship? What about the book of James: “Be doers of the word and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.” What about Jesus' words from Luke: “From

everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded?”

All of those things are true. But it’s a big Bible with a lot of messages. Messages for every time and every place and every need. And Jesus also says, “Come away with me to a quiet place and rest.”

And the Bible also says, “Consider the lilies of the field, they do not toil, neither do they spin.”

And the Psalmist says simply, “Be Still, and know that I am God.”

I wonder if that is not the message for these times, or at least the message for today. At this moment, for this hour, this is your sanctuary. And instead of a thousand concerns, a thousand demands, a hurried, harried worried, world, there is, in this place, for you—

The sufficiency of God. God within you. God above you. God beneath you. God behind you. God around you.

Breathe. Be. Fall into the embrace of God who loves you more than you know. Hear the voice of God—"I know you. I created you. I love you."

Sometimes a child simply needs to be held—held until the hurting stops, until the howling stops.

Sometimes a child of God.....simply needs to be held by God.

I used to have a message framed on my desk:

"You do not have to feel absolutely, irrevocably responsible for everything.

That's my job. Love, God. Somewhere, I lost that message. Somewhere, have we all lost it? Is that why we feel like so little butter, scraped over so much bread? Then, just for today, hear these words once more:

Come unto me all you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Come away with me, to a quiet place and rest awhile.

My grace is sufficient for you.

Amen.