

From Stress to Rest: My Future
Matthew 11:25-30, Psalm 147 (Responsive Psalm)

Happy New Year everyone! Welcome not only to a new year but also to a new decade. I imagine all of us hope “twenty-ten” is more restful than the decade we have just come through. Do you recall how 1999 ended and 2000 began? Our computers were all supposed to stop running because of a glitch in the digital numbering system. We called it the Y2K bug or the millennium bug. It stressed so many people that some wondered if the end of the world might be near. Few of us will forget the horrifying experience of 9/11 in 2001 with its ongoing consequences of worldwide terrorism. We have also been feeling the anxiety and stress surrounding global warming. And for the past year or so, many have felt the worry and stress from the meltdown of supposedly rock-solid financial and automotive institutions with the consequences of thousands of lost jobs, reduced pension monies, big-time losses in investments and incredible national debt. So of course we want a less stressful and more restful future.

When we feel stressed, people have different coping strategies. For instance, in an issue [*Sound Off*, AARP Bulletin (March 2005)] of the AARP Bulletin -- the American counterpart to our Canadian CARP or Canadian Association for Retired Persons -- readers were asked to respond to the question: What's your strategy for coping with stress? The answers ranged from “Eat a chocolate chip cookie” (I like that one) to “Have a stiff drink.” But Don Betz of Oakdale, Minnesota, offered his own unique solution. Every January 1st, Betz says, “I give my wife \$1, and she worries about everything for both of us.” Betz then added, “If someone else wants to be worry-free, they can also send her a dollar.”

We are beginning a message series today called “From Stress to Rest.” If I were to do a survey on what stresses you, how would you respond? When that question was asked in one large congregation, the number one response was fear of the future. Then various other responses fell into line after that one: areas such as finances, work, sex and faith. We haven't done our own survey but, perhaps over the next few weeks, you might note the stresses in your life. Write them down and, if I don't consider them this month, let me know and let's see what is possible in the weeks ahead. But, for the next four weeks, we will consider this movement from stress to rest in the context of our future, our finances, our work and our emotions.

Stress is epidemic in the western world. More than two-thirds of office visits to physicians are said to be for stress-related illnesses. And stress is a major contributing factor, either directly or indirectly, to coronary artery disease, cancer, respiratory disorders, accidental injuries, cirrhosis of the liver and suicide.

We all have to deal with stress in one way or another, whether the common day-to-day stresses or the difficult life-and-death stresses. And you will be glad to know – if you don't already – that Jesus understands very well the stresses and strains of the human condition. We heard in the Scripture passage from the Gospel of Matthew 11:28-30 his clear invitation to move from stress to rest by trusting him with our lives. Listen to the invitation again:

“Come to me, all of you who are tired from carrying heavy loads and I will give you rest. Take my yoke and put it on you, and learn from me, because I am gentle and humble in

spirit; and you will find rest. For the yoke I will give you is easy, and the load I will put on you is light.”

Jesus invites each of us to come to him and he will give us rest. So at the beginning of this new year, if you are feeling the stress of carrying a heavy load, Jesus Christ invites you to come *to him* and he will give you what you need. He will take you from your place of stress to his place of rest.

Let me also be clear, it is not unchristian to experience stress. Maybe I didn't need to say that but there are those who think otherwise. That's the intriguing paradox: when you read all Jesus had to say, he never promised us a completely stress-free life but he does promise us rest in the midst of the stress in which we find ourselves. For instance, every so often the Apostle Paul found himself in stressful situations. Second Corinthians 7:5 is one such time. Paul says: “Even after we arrived in Macedonia, we had no rest. There were troubles everywhere, quarrels with others, fears in our hearts.” In other words, there was conflict from every direction. How true is that for many people? We dread going to the office because there is conflict there. Or we dread coming home because there is conflict there. Or maybe we even dreaded going back home at Christmastime because there is still conflict there. Whatever the circumstance might be, there are very few of us who haven't felt some kind of conflict at one time or another. And external circumstances take a toll on us inside. That's what stress does. Even Paul experienced fear inside because of the stress of conflict and uncertainty he encountered. That's why we are looking at our future today. Because, for many, the fear of the future is a big stress in their lives. Why? Because the future is unknown. It is uncertain. We don't know what's going to happen. We are not happy where we are right now. So what do we do? How do we move from stress to rest in the future?

Here are some things to consider whenever you feel stressed about the future.

Remember God's faithfulness. In Psalm 42, King David talked about how depressed he was about what was happening in his kingdom. In verses 5 and 6 he asks: “Why am I so sad? Why am I so troubled?” And then he remembers – God! He says: “I will put my hope [and my trust] in God and once again I will praise my Saviour and my God.” And then he falls back into discouragement and says: “My heart is breaking.” But then he remembers -- God's kindness in his past. He says: “I will remember you [God] from Mt. Hermon, the source of the Jordan, from the land of Mt. Mizar.” In other words, as he looked back over the history of his entire kingdom, he remembered how God had been with him and faithful to him in the past. So King David took hope in God again for the future.

People remember God's faithfulness in their lives in different ways. Some keep journals in which they record circumstances and readings they consider significant and helpful -- in both good times and bad. Others keep mementos to remind them of things they have accomplished or when God's care and goodness were especially evident in their lives. And some have written their memories only in their minds. In my first Bible as a new believer in Jesus, on one of the front pages, I wrote three significant quotations that solidified, for me, my relationship with God at that time. If you haven't already done so, find your own way of remembering a special sense of God's presence with you and of God's goodness to you even in times of personal difficulty so

you will remember, like King David, and experience encouragement for the future. One of my favourite songs is “Count Your Blessings”: “Count your blessings, name them one by one, And it will surprise you what the Lord has done.” Whenever we feel fear about our future, the first step is to count the blessings in our lives – and to remember God’s faithfulness to us in the past.

Another thing we can do in dealing with stress is to **evaluate the specific source of the stress**. And today I am speaking specifically of the common day-to-day stresses, not the life-and-death stresses. What is it exactly that is causing us stress? Do we know? When someone tells me that he or she is stressed out, I will ask what they are stressed about. Some will say: “Well, everything, you know.” We often feel that way but, when we dig a little deeper, it is not usually “everything.” (It may be one particularly difficult person at work. Or a relationship that is not going well. Or a life that doesn’t have the purpose and fulfillment we had hoped.) So it is important to get behind the cloud of “everything” and identify what is specifically causing the stress. One of the things I have learned through my counselling experience is that, when we can face and name what is causing the stress, our stress level is often lowered and then we can begin to deal with whatever is happening.

I remember my first time on a hospital unit as a chaplain-in-training and the stress I felt that day. I still remember the questions I had: Will I be accepted by the patients and by the staff? Will my presence make a positive difference in a patient’s response to his or her illness? Will I have any real sense of a person’s suffering? And when I began in January 2007 as the minister here at OYM, I found myself feeling stressed and the questions were not much different: Will I be accepted by the people in the church? Will my presence and ministry be a positive influence in their lives? Will I be able to journey compassionately in faith with them? Some things never change! But when we identify as clearly as we can what we are facing, then we can work with it.

It is also helpful to understand that stress can be used for good or for bad. Good stress is what God allows in our lives to help us grow in faith and maturity. Good stress can result from good decisions we make. For example, the stress I felt in my days as a budding chaplain and about beginning as the minister of this congregation was good stress. I believe God wanted me to be a chaplain and a pastor. So this good stress made me sensitive and helped me grow in my understanding of myself and others and in my relationship with God.

But there is also bad stress. And bad stress is distress. In the common day-to-day stresses that we face, bad stress can happen whenever we do (or someone else does) something outside the good God desires for our lives. Then there may well be distressing consequences. Alcohol, gambling or sex addictions can obviously lead to strain and even break-up in a marriage. But also, holding onto bitterness rather than forgiving can lead to the failure of any relationship. There is clearly distress with those moments in life. But understand this, even at those times when we experience the consequences of bad decisions on our part or others, God has not left us. When we turn to God for help, God can graciously enable us to grow in our faith and personal maturity even through distress such as this.

There is also the stress of worry that is all too common for many people. Listen to what Jesus said about worry as part of his Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 6:31-34:

“So do not start worrying: ‘Where will my food come from? or my drink? or my clothes?’
³²(These are the things [the people who don’t know God or how God works] are always concerned about.) Your Father in heaven knows that you need all these things. ³³Instead, be concerned above everything else with the Kingdom of God and with what he requires of you, and he will provide you with all these other things. ³⁴So do not worry about tomorrow; it will have enough worries of its own. There is no need to add to the troubles each day brings.”

Bad stress or distress results from bad decisions or constant worry and distraction over concerns such as these about food and clothing. Good stress results from the concern we may have about living the way God wants us to live. And in a nutshell, Jesus stated God’s will for our lives in the two great commandments: we are to **love God** with all our mind and heart and soul and strength and to **love our neighbour** as we love ourselves. When we love and trust God like this, we will discover our own stress and needs can be met; when we love and help our neighbours near and far, we can help to relieve their stress and meet their needs.

Jesus also tells us not to be overly concerned about the future -- what may happen tomorrow or what we may need tomorrow. That’s the idea when he says, “Do not worry about tomorrow.” There will be enough things to worry about tomorrow, he says, so don’t add the *possible* troubles and worries of tomorrow to today’s trouble.

At the beginning of 2010, I have a New Year’s prayer for each of us. My prayer is that we will experience as much good stress as necessary to encourage us to place the entirety of our lives – our future, our finances, our work, our emotions, our families, our relationships, our health and our very souls – into the rest God offers us in Jesus Christ. In other words, let’s **trust God completely with our future** – with all our todays and with all our tomorrows.

You see, stress is really an issue of trust of God. Stress is a warning light. It tells us something is out of kilter. It may tell us we have misplaced our trust – or maybe we have not intentionally placed our trust in God.

Those of you who read yesterday’s devotion from *Our Daily Bread* [January, February, March, 2010 Jan. 2] will recognize the following story. Cindy Kasper wrote:

“The highway that winds around the southern shore of Lake Michigan can be treacherous in the winter. One weekend as we were driving back to Grand Rapids from Chicago, a buildup of snow and ice slowed traffic, caused numerous accidents, and almost doubled drive time. We were relieved as we eased off the expressway onto our final road. It was then that my husband said out loud, ‘Thanks, Lord. I think I can take it from here.’

“Just as he finished saying the words, our car spun around 180 degrees. As we came to a stop, hearts pounding, we could just imagine God saying: ‘Are you sure?’”

Sometimes I write my own prayers. You heard my New Year’s prayer a moment ago:

My prayer is that each of us will experience as much good stress as is necessary to encourage us to place the entirety of our lives – our future, our finances, our work, our emotions, our

families, our relationships, our health and our very souls – into the rest God offers us in Jesus Christ.

We also heard Jesus' invitation this morning when he said, "**Come to me**, all of you who are tired from carrying heavy loads **and I will give you rest.**"

And the following prayer struck a responsive chord in my thinking and in my heart. Let me conclude with a New Year's prayer by writer Christine Sine. I trust it will find a positive response in your heart as well. [<http://godspace.wordpress.com/2010/01/02/praying-in-the-new-year/>]

God keep me faithful through the days that lie ahead.
God keep me caring as I see the pain that fills your world.
God keep me serving as I seek to do your will.
God live in me. God live with me. God live through me.
God keep me loving toward neighbours near and far.
God keep me trusting through the uncertainties of life.
God keep me sharing from your generous abundance.
God live in me. God live with me. God live through me.
[God] unveil in me your image.

May this be so for you and for me. Amen.

Rev. Chris Miller
January 3, 2010