Jesus said, “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, 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.”

Lord Christ, uphold thou me that I might uplift thee. Amen.

Last week began our parish commitment to read the Bible in a year, and Father Kevin offered a forum to discuss the goals of this initiative as well as some concrete advice for how to proceed with things like choosing which translation of the Bible to use. I default almost entirely to the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) of the Bible because it was the assigned text at my seminary. Some of my professors were contributors to the translation itself or the commentary in the NRSV Harper Collins Study Bible.

My brother once asked what translation I would recommend for devotional use and daily reading. He was thinking of getting the King James Version; my initial reaction was to dissuade him since the traditional language is not as accessible or easily comprehended as the more commonplace vernacular that is used in modern translations. I realized, however, that there are a number of passages and verses from Scripture that many of us recognize and know better, sometimes even by heart, in the King James translation. For example, the 23rd Psalm, “the Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want…”

Perhaps the same is true for the text from today’s Gospel: “Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls” (KJV).

Truth be told, to read or hear that version, “all ye that labour and are heavy laden,” makes me--now in my 39th week of pregnancy--feel a little typecast as today’s preacher but these words from Scripture, whichever translation or form, actually always speak to me. Hopefully they speak to us all. Inviting us all to consider our needs and to contemplate rest.

The church I served right out of seminary was in midtown Manhattan. Like most New York City churches its personality was somewhat determined by the neighborhood in which it was located and the demographic it served; but Incarnation, like other city churches, also had some eclectic customs that set it apart. The Church of the Incarnation was a Rite One parish. The majority of the services celebrated were, and likely still are, Rite One, that is traditional language (thee, thou, thy, thine as well as beseech, meet and right, vouchsafe, etc). Sunday after Sunday, and my very first Eucharist celebrated as a priest, were done using the traditional form and language of Rite One.
Among some of the differences between Rite One and Rite Two is something called the “Comfortable Words.” Immediately following the confession and absolution, before the peace is exchanged, the priest is offered four verses from Scripture that can be said. I used the same verse time and time again, and admittedly miss that they are not part of our regular practice:

“Hear the Word of God to all who truly turn to him, Come unto me all ye that travail and are heavy laden and I will refresh you.”

Comfortable words. As the church of the Holy Comforter we have talked at length about the word “to comfort;” despite its common usages, the linguistic root is not related to easing, to placating, soothing or otherwise avoiding or removing discomfort, but rather means to strengthen. “Con fort,” with strength. This Scripture passage, offered after an honest assessment of our sins and the pronouncement of God’s forgiveness and grace, is intended as comfortable words to strengthen the worshipper to continue worshipping in right relationship with her neighbor--as they exchange the peace--and right relationship with God--as she receives Communion.

Comfortable words, “Come unto me all ye that travail and are heavy laden and I will refresh you.” We will be strengthened in our labors, renewed and refreshed under the weights of our burdens.

Of course, the Gospel passage we heard does not stop with those comfortable words; Jesus goes on to say, “Take my yoke upon you.” This can seem paradoxical; we were just invited as those who are weary and heavy laden to rest but now we are being asked to assume more, a yoke, a piece of farming equipment that will presumably involve us in further labor like beasts of burden, oxen or cattle.

What exactly is going on here? Is the invitation to rest or to work? Can it possibly be both?

Rest like comfort may need a new understanding, this one not related to linguistics but theology.

Jesus is neither inviting us to sleep in late nor neglect our responsibilities nor is he (in this passage) inviting us to contemplative practices and meditation. The rest that he invites us to experience, Biblical rest, allows us to distinguish our labor, our work, our plans, priorities and preoccupations from those of God. We rest in order to recognize that we do not make the world go round. Fortunately for us, someone else is in charge of that.

Think of sabbath rest, the instruction to rest on the seventh day. Sabbath keeps us mindful of the Creator who rested, allowing all of creation to live into its god-given purpose and potential without constant meddling. Sabbath rest also reminds us that our Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier is continually at work among us even as we confront our limits, as we encounter situations over which we are truly powerless, as we sleep. That is the power of rest: the recognition that some of the weight we carry comes from trying to do things on our own that God would invite us to do in partnership with God.
Twelve step programs have captured the sentiment of this passage with the slogan, “Let Go and Let God.” Let go of the burdens you are struggling to carry on your own and partner with God as God does for us what we cannot do for ourselves. “Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me.”

I have not yet labored but I am heavy laden and if this pregnancy has taught me anything, and I pray it has, it has taught me my need to depend on others. There is a child inside my womb that has been, is, and will continue to depend on me. It is a humbling and awe-inspiring process and it has only be possible for me to maintain my sanity and my serenity in this season by depending on others. A whole host of others: medical professionals, my colleagues and my church community, an extended network family and friends, and most consistently and humbly my family--my mom from a distance; Terry, TJ, and Townsend up close, day in and day out--who have supported me as my physical, emotional and even spiritual needs have shifted, altering the dynamics in our household as well as in our relationships. Not comfortable but comforting, strengthening, and entirely necessary.

Also necessary has been my dependence on God, especially as the time draws near and I entrust my body and the the new life within it to a process that I have faith both baby and I have been created for, in partnership with God. If anything, the baby will teach me what needs to be done, and God, I pray, will help me to breathe.

This last week as I have prepared for this sermon, I have heard and considered the meaning this text holds for others: a colleague who is challenged by a commissioning that invites us to trade the weight of our preoccupations and concerns for that of the gospel imperatives and discipleship; a family member who confided how much hope it gave her as a child to know that Jesus understood the weight she shouldered with a parent with untreated depression and bouts of rage. And then there is me, a pregnant priest, who rather than being typecast was given the gift of a gospel that reminds her that her limits are merely an invitation to partner with a God whose purposes, whose power and whose peace she can trust. She can depend on.

“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, 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.” Amen.