



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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Keeping the Sabbath Wholly: Cease

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Cease
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Exodus 16:21-30

Matthew 6:25-33

The essence of our Scripture readings this morning is summed up in one phrase: “Stop, in the name of love.”

God is telling the Israelites in the wilderness as they gather food for the Sabbath, and Jesus is speaking to the same point in the Sermon on the Mount (and if I had thought about it earlier, I would have the choir stand right now and give me some backup): “Stop, in the name of love!”

The name Sabbath comes from the Hebrew verb “*shabbat*”, which means primarily “to cease or desist”. This is the Fourth Commandment: “*To remember the Sabbath and keep it holy.*” H-O-L-Y, and for our Lenten sermon series, the play on words is intentional: Keeping the Sabbath Wholly... W-H-O-L-L-Y.

First of all, we must note that the day is “a Sabbath to the Lord”; in other words, it is ceasing in order to honor the creating God, to enjoy the promises of God.

The late John Kipp, a dear friend and wonderful pastor and scholar, gave the picture of the Ten Commandments as a cross: the commandments one through three about our responsibilities toward God as vertical and those toward people, commandments five through ten, as horizontal. He said that the Fourth Commandment is at the intersection of that horizontal and vertical. And I would say: what do you do at an intersection? You stop! Put your foot on the brake! Cease!

For the most part, we pay little attention to the Sabbath. We zoom right past it. Gordon Dahl describes it this way: “We worship our work, work at our play, and play at our worship.” We come to the intersection, and we run right through the Sabbath stop!

Do you remember that scene in the classic movie “Forrest Gump” where Forrest is running and running and running, until one day he stops in the middle of nowhere and says, “I’m tired, I want to go home;” but the world wants us to keep running, and we feel the pressures, the push, the pace of our daily lives, the demands of nanosecond technology, and the drive to outdo others.

One of the ugliest things about our culture is that we usually assess a person’s worth on the basis of his or her productivity and accomplishments. Think about it, it’s one of the first questions we ask of a stranger, “What do you do?” Or we identify ourselves as ‘retired’ as if our work still claims us.

But we are more than our work. What makes you cry? Makes you laugh? How do you feel about sunsets? Or holding a baby? Or what gets you excited about life? Our identity is not defined by what puts money in our bank account or by the résumé we carry with us.

Our story from Exodus shows us this is not a new situation. It is as old as Pharaoh’s insatiable demand for production from his slaves. It is impossible to imagine that in the Pharaoh’s world there could ever be any day to stop.

As we know from the remarkable story of the Exodus, Israel is finally delivered from Pharaoh’s oppression and comes to the wilderness; there they are given enough bread for the

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day. Israel cannot store up bread for more than a day; except (and it's a big EXCEPT) on the sixth day Israel may store up enough for the seventh day so that it can cease, rest on the Sabbath.

Moses said, *“Eat it today, for today is a sabbath to the LORD; today you will not find it in the field. Six days you shall gather it; but on the seventh day, which is a sabbath, there will be none.”* On the seventh day some of the people went out to gather, and they found none. (These are the people who still lived by Pharaoh's system) *See! The LORD has given you the sabbath, therefore on the sixth day he gives you food for two days...*”

This unexpected provision in the wilderness with its scarce resources is a sign that this life-giving bread is from the sustaining power of the creator God. The great Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann says that this story shows that where God rules instead of Pharaoh, there the peace of God effectively counters the restless anxiety of Pharaoh's economy.

Jesus is speaking to that anxiety because for so many of us, most of us...we all have our Pharaohs that won't let us stop working. Name your Pharaoh that pushes you to want more, have more, own more, use more, eat and drink more or the Pharaoh that puts you down because you don't think you have enough, do enough or did enough, or you don't measure up to what someone else did or you just plain feel 'second rate'.

That's why Brueggemann names “Sabbath as Resistance: Saying NO to the CULTURE OF NOW”. This rat race is a restlessness that reveals itself inevitably in anxiety just at the edge of overwhelming us, and I believe that when we step

over that edge, we are propelled to violence against our neighbor in eagerness to get what our neighbor has that we don't have, from property to peace.

Those are the concerns of the horizontal commandments. The celebration of Sabbath is resistance because it is a visible insistence that our lives are not defined by what we produce or by what we consume.

The celebration of Sabbath wholly holy is to inhale the breath of the Holy Spirit from the goodness of Creation, to liberation in the Exodus, to justice in the prophets, to the Kingdom in Jesus' teachings, to faith in the letters of Paul. In all of this, to remember the Sabbath is new life when we cease being our own gods, to abandon all sources of security in favor of the one God who loves us and sets us free.

I heard a story the other day about a young man who went to a card shop to pick out just the right Valentine's Day card. He told the saleslady he wanted to send one with just the right words that would express his deepest feelings. She quickly picked a card for him; the message was to the point: To the only girl I ever loved. He said, "Terrific! Just right! Give me six of them!"

We laugh, but that's you and me as the Sabbath that should honor the one Lord we love has become just one choice among the many lords we love on our calendar of events, more often than not just an extension of that other day that starts with S.

Ceasing requires enormous intentionality as we choose our way of life through the jungles of Amazon, the wilderness of Walmart, the perils of paycheck-to-paycheck, around the

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temples of football and soccer and swimming and band, along the hazardous hallways of social media and grades and cliques and bullying.

T.S. Eliot said something very haunting about choices: “In a world of fugitives the person taking the opposite direction will appear to run away.” Sabbath is the verb, the action word for us to choose the opposite direction from the seductive pressures of our Pharaohs, of not having enough, of not doing enough.

Yes, it looks like we’ve run away from the world because when you choose for God you are often standing apart, separated from the stampeding herd of things all around us and beyond us.

Now don’t get legalistic on me, and point out that doctors, nurses, firefighters, organists and preachers, just to name a few, all have to work on the Sabbath. Jesus himself healed on the Sabbath, and very pointedly said that the Sabbath is made for us humans, not us humans for the Sabbath; but the gospels strongly affirm that he faithfully observed the Sabbath.

The point is a time of ceasing a consistent habit, a regular rhythm of keeping the Sabbath every seven days; at the least, as Mary Ann McKibben-Dana says, “To live in a ‘sabbathly’ manner.”

In the play, “Cotton Patch Gospel” based on Clarence Jordan’s paraphrase of the New Testament, there is a scene in which Tom Key, playing Jesus, is giving the Sermon on the Mount. He speaks to the audience, and as he says, “Consider the lilies of the field...” he points to a wall. During one performance, he repeated the line several times,

“Consider the lilies...” looking at the audience and kept pointing at the wall. Finally, he turned to the other actors on stage and said, “I can’t get them to look!”

Is that it? We can’t stop long enough to look where Christ points to God at work. As Eugene Peterson says, “You’ve got to quit, one day a week and just watch what God is doing when you’re not doing anything.” As Marva Dawn puts it, “To “keep the Sabbath wholly” (W-H-O-L-L-Y) means to recognize that the rhythm of six days of work and one day of ceasing work is written into the very core of our beings.

Sunday morning worship is only one small part (though an essential one) of the whole meaning of keeping the Sabbath. “Going to church” means we come to a sanctuary to participate in an order of worship with other people of God gathered in a community, to be nourished by all that we do here together so that we can go out into the world and be church.” We are here to practice Sabbath time, to “stop, in the name of love.”

Maybe you’ve seen the meme of Pope Francis’ words about fasting for Lent. I’ve paraphrased those words to remind us that ceasing for Sabbath is a lifestyle for a life-time:

- Cease from hurting words and be filled with kind words.
- Cease from sadness and be filled with gratitude.
- Cease from anger and be filled with patience.
- Cease from pessimism and be filled with hope.
- Cease from worries and be filled with trust in God.
- Cease from complaints and be filled with simplicity.
- Cease from pressures and be filled with prayer.
- Cease from bitterness and fill your heart with joy.
- Cease from selfishness and be filled with compassion for others.

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- Cease from grudges and be filled by reconciliation.
- Cease from words and be filled by silence so you can listen.

When we come to that intersection called Sabbath and stop as a way of life, God promises that we will not come up empty, but we will be filled in the name of love.

TO GOD BE THE GLORY



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