

Rest Along the Way

The third sermon in a Lenten series entitled *Journeying to Jerusalem*

Exodus 20.1-17

The Third Sunday of Lent

March 15, 2009

The first holy thing in all creation was not a people or a place but a day. God made everything in creation and called it good, but when God rested on the seventh day, God called it holy. That makes the seventh day a “palace in time” into which we are invited every single week of our lives.

- Abraham Heschel

The Reading

Then God spoke all these words: ²I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; ³you shall have no other gods before me. ⁴You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. ⁵You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, ⁶but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments. ⁷You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses his name. ⁸Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. ⁹For six days you shall labour and do all your work. ¹⁰But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. ¹¹For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it. ¹²Honour your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you. ¹³You shall not murder. ¹⁴You shall not commit adultery. ¹⁵You shall not steal. ¹⁶You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour. ¹⁷You shall not covet your neighbour’s house; you shall not covet your neighbour’s wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbour.

Questions and More Questions

I propose that we take some time this morning to reflect on the notion of Sabbath rest; a rest that is quite important to the spiritual life. The Hebrew Bible addresses Sabbath in the Decalogue, or the Ten Commandments. We will begin our reflection there; but with one significant caveat. We ain’t gonna get nowhere fast in our attempt to understand the Ten

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Commandments unless we appreciate their unique role in the life of a Christian. The Ten Commandments, that is to say, are not demands imposed on Christians from the outside; rather they represent the yearnings of God's heart to give expression to light and life and goodness in our lives; yearnings that change us from the inside out. They represent the guidelines of love that come with the partnership and assistance of God; not the arbitrary demands of a divine overseer and judge. With that caveat noted we may proceed.

And what better way to proceed than with a joke or two. I often hear jokes about the religious life – of Baptists, Catholics, Lutherans, etc. - it's an occupational hazard as a pastor. I usually find them amusing so long as the one telling the joke is willing to poke fun at his or her faith group as well. Be that as it may, here are a couple of jokes about our Unitarian friends, who are known for being open minded, perhaps too open minded. It is often said in the Deep South, for example, that you have to be careful not to offend Unitarians, because they might burn a question mark in your front lawn. More to today's point, it is also said that Unitarians have only six commandments, because the other four are suggestions. Oh, you think that one's cute? I've got news for you, that attitude is not limited to Unitarians.

As a matter of fact, one among the commandments is almost universally viewed as a suggestion with little binding authority. Which do you think it might be? Your responses – from coveting your neighbors' possessions to killing – indicate that we like to slip around many of the commandments. I am thinking, however, of one particular commandment that is viewed more as a suggestion; I am thinking of the fourth commandment to “remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy.” More times than not we think of Sabbath rest as a suggestion, because we don't have the time or the inclination to take it seriously. We're too busy doing things for the Lord, improving our position in the community, taking care of our families, rising in the ranks of our profession, or supporting our favorite sports team. Let's be honest, we don't have time to consider the fourth commandment a true commandment. No, no, no; it's more like an extra credit question on a test. Keep the other nine and you can opt to obey the tenth for extra credit ...or not.

The fourth commandment is hard to obey because to take it seriously you have to swim against the current of our society in general, the culture of church life, and sometimes even

your own heart; all of which teach that success is indicated and measured by being busy. The more you are seen doing, the higher you will rise in the personal esteem of many. The person who stands tallest among us is the one who can multi-task like nobody's business, or whose personal calendar is crammed to overflowing. We have been taught to feel guilty if we slow down; to feel guilty if we're not dancing as fast as we can, shuffling wildly between obligations, spinning multiple plates at a time. However this may be, I should point out that God did not say multi-task on the Sabbath or achieve on the Sabbath; God said remember the Sabbath and keep it holy.

Sabbath, it would seem, has more to do with personal wellbeing and spiritual practices like prayer, meditation, acts of justice or compassion, and more. Let me pose another question; which spiritual practice do you think is the most difficult to sustain? Many will respond, prayer, because it's hard to set aside the time and gain the composure to spend quality time with God. Barbara Brown Taylor, however, is convinced that the most difficult spiritual practice to sustain is *saying no*. And saying no is very closely akin to honoring the Sabbath. We don't know how to say no because we're encouraged to get to yes as quickly as possible, or to persuade others to get to yes. If we are going to honor the fourth commandment, we're going to have to learn to say no, and to give ourselves and each other permission to stop, and to honor the Sabbath as a rest along the way. What would it look like, this honoring the Sabbath? What would it mean to our lives? How would it affect our spiritual wellbeing? Questions like these will occupy the remainder of our time this morning. As we begin let's share a word of prayer.

Gracious One, bring us to that place deep within our hearts where you abide. Bring us to rest there and to realize that life is not about the busyness and the accumulation, the schedules and the frantic pace, but is about awareness of all the goodness around us, of all the good people around us, and of your presence in our hearts. Give us a touch of Sabbath rest today, so that we may remember, and remembering find it again in the days to come. In the name of the Christ, we pray. Amen.

Sabbath Candles

This is the third Sunday in Lent, and thus our third reflection on the spiritual attitudes and practices we need in order to complete successfully our journeying to Jerusalem. I suggested two weeks ago that the first step on this successful journey involves recognizing that we already have everything we need for the journey. We spend so much time seeking our

heart's treasure; we search for the proverbial X that marks its location without realizing that we're standing smack dab on top of the X, because God – the true treasure of our hearts - is present to us every step of our journey. I know it sounds contradictory to say that we're on a journey toward God in God's presence; but we have to say that ...because it's true.

Last week we reflected on our propensity to make mistakes, take detours, even make wrong turns altogether in our spiritual lives. It's true; none of us is without spiritual blunder. But I suggested last week that these blunders can be spiritual blessings. That is to say, God can use our mistakes and wrong turns to mold us spiritually and make us blessings to others; just like God did with Peter, whose faith took forever to mature. But, oh my, how it finally matured! God can and will use every part of who we are and every moment in our history to mold us into the people God wants us to become. God can even use our mistakes to mold us into deeper, more sensitive, more humble people. This is good news for those of us who have a propensity to take wrong turns in our spiritual lives.

Today we will consider our need for Sabbath rest in our lives. If we are to make it to Jerusalem, we will need some rest along the way. We need Sabbath rest because we can't keep up the frantic pace of our lives and maintain any spiritual balance. And it's not just any rest we need. My dad once gave me a perfect example of the kind of rest we don't need. On a marathon road trip from our home in Birmingham, Alabama, to Albuquerque, New Mexico, he worked his normal ten hour shift in the pipe mill, and then drove for twenty six straight hours before stopping to sleep. Needless to say, when he awoke the next morning he was not refreshed; in fact, he looked like death warmed over. Sorry dad, this is not the rest we need in our lives.

Sabbath rest comes when we realize that the quality of our lives and the freedom to become *more* both depend on the spiritual respite we call Sabbath. Our Jewish friends have understood this for ages. When Sabbath begins in a Jewish household at sundown on Friday evening, they light two candles inscribed with Sabbath wisdom.

The first inscription reads, *Created in the image of God, you too shall rest.* Of course, Sabbath rest can be traced to the creation narratives in Genesis; and as Abraham Heschel reminds us, the seventh day, the day of rest, has a particular significance in God's eyes. It was

the first holy thing in all of creation. When God created the universe, everything created in six days was pronounced good; but the seventh day God pronounced holy ...and rested from all labor. And as God rested, so we too are to rest. Not a brief cessation of our frantic activities and running to and fro, but rest that affords us ample space for our spirits to breathe and be refreshed. Sabbath rest is an opportunity to slow down enough to disentangle ourselves from the web of chaos and frantic activity that usually binds us tightly.

Again, Sabbath rest is not like being sent to your room without supper; it involves no constraint or restriction. God spent the seventh day examining the teensy tiniest details of the creation and celebrating their beauty and goodness. God soaked up the beauty of those sunsets that he created. God rested and did the things that fed his spirit. God rested; a rest that allowed him to breathe in all the goodness around him. This is the rest we need.

The second inscription on the Sabbath candles reads, *Created in God's image, you too are free*. Sabbath rest is not about restriction or constraint; and we see now that it is not about obligation or duty either; Sabbath rest is about freedom; freedom that began for the ancient Hebrews at the time of the Exodus. Sabbath in the Deep South of my childhood was not about freedom from constraint or the rest that refreshes. If my memory serves, it was more about misery than freedom. The Bible might as well have read, *Remember the Sabbath day and keep it miserable*. I'm not kidding! There was a list a mile long of things we couldn't do on Sunday; all involving enjoyment. Even worse, we kids had to keep our Sunday-go-to-meetin' clothes on all day, because there was always a formal dinner (lunch was called dinner on Sunday), and always church again that night.

Somehow we missed the point; because Sabbath rest is not about obligation or duty, but about freedom. It's about saying no to the things that drag down our spirits; saying no to the things that pull us frantically this way and that; saying no to the things that blind us to the love shining in the faces of our family and friends; and saying yes to the things that nurture our spirits. For some that might mean sitting quietly with a good book, reading the Bible, or spending time in prayer. For others, that might mean taking a walk on a nature trail. For others still that might mean going on a picnic with the family. Any activity that nurtures your spirit, opens your eyes to God's presence, and to the goodness and beauty all around is your calling in

Sabbath freedom. But such freedom requires space; and space is hard to come by in our culture.

Space is hard to come by in our faith communities as well. We pride ourselves on our ability to forge ahead, always saying yes, and weighing ourselves down with onerous responsibilities. We call this being faithful; but I have my doubts. As a matter of fact, we will stand no chance of honoring Sabbath in our lives until and unless we give ourselves – and others – permission to say no. Thank you for thinking of me, but no; I have all the roles I can fulfill with integrity right now. No, I'm sorry; one more meeting is not going to work this week.

Meetings; I sometimes think we meet for the sake of meeting. At least then we have accomplishments to report; we met six times! Call me a rebel – call me a heretic – but I think we schedule far too many meetings in the church. We should meet when we need to meet; when we need to envision our ministry and mission; when we need to finalize and formalize plans for wonderful ministry activities and programs. The rest of the time we should turn people loose with their creativity; trusting them to breathe life into our ministry plans, and come back together when it's time to celebrate and begin to dream again. I've mentioned before that my goal is to look at our calendar after five years and see more time and space reserved for spiritual activities – worship, prayer, fellowship, and service – than for committee meetings.

Passion, Poise, and Sabbath

The quality of our lives and the maturity of our spirits depend on giving ourselves permission to find the rest we need - and the freedom we need - on the Sabbath. From all I've said to this point, it should be clear that Sabbath is really an attitude. We need not argue about which day is really the Sabbath. We do, however, need to take a day - be it Saturday, be it Sunday, be it Monday – and afford ourselves rest and freedom. In this regard I had a wakeup call several years ago when my orthopedic surgeon told me I needed a total knee replacement, and my response was to smile at the thought of some vacation time! What's wrong with this picture? Major surgery and convalescence is no vacation; but I had been working so much that it had that appeal.

I suffer from the same problem as many others in the church who consider its work truly significant; reaching out to others in compassion, standing for justice in our community. So we don't say no, we keep on working. But neither do we honor the fourth commandment. The truth is, ironically, that we can do both. That is to say, when we take the time for Sabbath rest we will be at least as productive as when we don't, if not more so. This is because taking the time for Sabbath rest doesn't take away the fire that burns within. We can still be hungry for God. It doesn't take away our passion; it just allows us to package that passion - not in frantic activity running from one thing to the next - but in a poised and confident attitude. Knowing that we rest in God; knowing that we live in a broad Sabbath space in which we can breathe in God; knowing we have rest and freedom we can take in all of the good things around us and at the same time be productive in our efforts.

I pray that we will take the fourth commandment seriously in our faith community. It's not a suggestion, you know. Rather, God in divine wisdom has tried to convince us that along the way to our spiritual goal we need rest. May it be so for you this day. Amen.