

June 2, 2024
The Second Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 4B
Grace Church, Muncie
The Rev. Dr. Paul Jacobson, *Rector*

Deuteronomy 5:12-15

Psalm 81:1-10

2 Corinthians 4:5-12

Mark 2:23-3:6

In the Name the Holy and Undivided Trinity. Amen.

I want to begin this morning by quoting an ancient religious authority, Bilbo Baggins. In Tolkien's 1954 novel, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Bilbo complains, "I feel all thin, sort of stretched, if you know what I mean: like butter that has been scraped over too much bread."¹ Does that sound familiar to any of you?

In these days of instant communication, and the expectation of instant response, it is easy to feel scraped. The non-stop stimulus of incoming information may fool us into thinking that we're being more efficient. But we ignore our need for rest and renewal at the peril of others and ourselves.

Sometimes exhaustion makes us dangerous, like when we are too tired to drive. Or, in notable industrial accidents that occurred in the middle of the night — the Exxon Valdez, Three Mile Island, and Chernobyl to name a few. Falling asleep at the switch is a real thing.

But perhaps the greater danger is the harm we do to our own souls. Barbara Brown Taylor writes, "Some of us have made an idol of exhaustion. The only time we know we have done enough is when we're running on empty and when the ones we love most are the ones we see the least. When we lie down to sleep at night, we offer our full appointment calendars to God in lieu of prayer, believing that God—who is as busy as we are—will surely understand."² My friends, rest is leaking out of the world at an alarming rate.

So what do we do? How do we find rest and renewal not only for our bodies but also for our souls? The answer lies in the fourth commandment. Listen once more. "Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy, as the Lord your God commanded you. 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—you, or your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock, or the resident alien in your towns, so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you" (Deuteronomy 5:12-14).

The simple answer seems to be – observe the Sabbath. I must confess to you that I don't do this very well. It is ironic to the Nth degree that I wrote this sermon on Friday, which is supposed to be my Sabbath, because I needed to be at Waycross most of the day yesterday. So,

¹ Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, p. 42.

² <https://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/1999/november/12119.html>

I may not have many answers, but I do have some questions about the fourth commandment. Maybe you can wonder along with me.

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I suppose the first question is, “what does this commandment mean?” We're told to observe or to keep or to remember the Sabbath day, the seventh day of the week. And we are told to keep the Sabbath holy. Think of remembering a special day, say an anniversary. It's one thing to come home and say, "Oh yeah, I remember, it's our anniversary." It is another thing altogether to arrange dinner and flowers, maybe even a weekend away. In the same way, the Sabbath is to be remembered and kept.

The first thing is to stop working – and that meant everyone. Children, slaves, even animals are included. This day is kept holy by stopping your work and resting. And (isn't there always an and?) – the Sabbath wasn't just a day to rest; it was also a day to worship—a day to replenish the soul.

The seventh century theologian Maximus the Confessor wrote, “the Sabbath rest of God is the full return to him of all creatures.” Union with God in worship is holy rest.

In our own day, Eugene Peterson wrote that the Sabbath is “uncluttered time and space to distance ourselves from the frenzy of our own activities so we can see what God was and is doing. If we don't regularly quit work one day a week, we take ourselves far too seriously. The moral sweat pouring off our brow blinds us to the primal action of God in and around us.”³

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The second question might be, “why was this commandment given?” There are a couple of reasons. In the version of the Ten Commandments that we have in Exodus 20, we read, "For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy" (Exodus 20:11).

This was something new in the world. In pagan religions, *places* were holy – a mountain, or a river. But the Abrahamic faiths found something Godly in a ritual of rest amid the flow of *time*.⁴ If God stopped working on the seventh day, so should we.

Think for a moment about the daily rhythm of work and sleep. When we spend too much time chasing the idol of exhaustion, we pay for it, body and soul. Keeping to a weekly rhythm of work and rest isn't quite as easy, so we need to pay more attention to it.

In his wonderful book called *Sabbath as Resistance*, Walter Brueggemann sums it up this way: “That divine rest on the seventh day of creation has made clear that (a) YHWH is not a

³ Eugene Peterson, *Working with the Angels*.

⁴ See Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath*, 1951.

workaholic, (b) that YHWH is not anxious about the full functioning of creation, and (c) that the well-being of creation does not depend on endless work.”⁵

The re-telling of the Ten Commandments in Deuteronomy reminds us that Sabbath rest is also a witness to God’s liberation of Israel from bondage in Egypt. For 400 years Israel labored as slaves in Egypt without a Sabbath – until God delivered them.

Sabbath rest is a weekly recalling of God’s great gift of rest – rescuing them from slavery in a land where no rest was allowed. Israel was to show the same mercy to others that God had shown to them.

Just so, there are humanitarian and justice aspects to keeping the Sabbath. Human beings (and animals) are more than just machines, more than mere units of production, as the Israelites were in Egypt. As too many people are today – those who toil at multiple jobs but can barely survive.

Sounding strikingly modern, Aristotle (384-322 BCE) identified rest as important for recharging in preparation for more work. Abraham Joshua Heschel reminds us that this line of thinking misses the biblical point. “The Sabbath,” he writes, “is a day for the sake of life. People are not beasts of burden, and the Sabbath is not for the purpose of enhancing the efficiency of their work.”

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The final question for us is, how do we keep the Sabbath today? The fourth commandment is the only one that we’re allowed, even encouraged, to brag about breaking. Controversies over if, and how, and on what day Sabbath is kept have plagued the church from the beginning.

What we do know from the Gospels is that Jesus kept the Sabbath, but with a different understanding than the religious authorities. In the passage from Mark today, his disciples harvested grain and ate. Jesus healed a man with a withered hand. All on the Sabbath.

When confronted by the Pharisees, Jesus reminds them (and us) of the purpose of the Sabbath – to give rest and spiritual refreshment. In the Pharisees’ desire to protect the sabbath, they nearly suffocated it with their lists of rules.

Lest we be too hard on the Pharisees and their lists of rules, we ought to remember our own ancestors, Protestant and Catholic, with their lists of Sabbath “thou shalt nots.” But the lists are not the point. The lists are never the point. Jesus didn’t abolish the Sabbath but restored its true meaning as a day of rest, worship, and mercy.

The Sabbath is a day to show mercy, as Jesus did in healing that man’s hand. It’s a perfect day to welcome a hurting person into your home, visit someone in the hospital, feed someone who is hungry, or just spend time with someone who is lonely.

⁵ Walter Brueggemann, *Sabbath as Resistance* (2014) p. 7.

The Sabbath is a day of worship. Albert Schweitzer said, "If your soul has no Sunday, it becomes an orphan." The Lord's Day is a day to gather with God's people, to make a holy convocation (Leviticus 23:3). The day itself doesn't matter as much as having a weekly rhythm where we observe a discipline of gathering in community to worship God.

Finally, the Sabbath is a day of rest. Whatever *your* work is, press pause once a week and relax. Instead of working, do things that refuel your body, your mind, your relationships, and your soul.

For those of us who idolize exhaustion, who don't mind feeling like butter that has been scraped over too much bread, or who keep scrolling for Fear Of Missing Out (FOMO), or who imagine that the world simply cannot get along without us and our comments (and I am raising my hand), I urge you, once a week, to stop long enough to recall, and worship, the God in whose image you are created, who rested on the seventh day and called that time holy.

And I invite you to join me in putting these words of Walter Brueggemann near your computer, your tablet, or your phone...

"That divine rest on the seventh day of creation has made clear that (a) YHWH is not a workaholic, (b) that YHWH is not anxious about the full functioning of creation, and (c) that the well-being of creation does not depend on endless work."

Amen.⁶

⁶ Deep thanks for the inspiration of Mark Mitchell and his sermon *Rediscovering the Sabbath*. Todah Rabah.