

“Interrupting the Cycle”

Sermon by Vicar Kevin Tracey

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Sabbath Series 1

Deut. 5:12-15; Matt. 11:28-30

Grace to you and Peace, from God our Creator and our Lord Jesus the Christ. Amen.

I must admit, growing up, the concept of a Sabbath day seemed pretty cool to me. Now, of course, I was very clear that this sabbath day was in addition to the weekend and therefore should result in a four-day school week; I sort of avoided the “six days you shall labor” part of the scripture.

It was, perhaps a slightly misguided idea on my end, but I was dancing close to the truth nonetheless. See, in my young world view, the Sabbath day was this unobtainable pipe-dream of a thing that was a perfect day of rest—it was something that I could image but couldn’t actually see coming true in this world. After all, Saturday and Sunday were full of cleaning and yard work and homework and errands—so they couldn’t be a Sabbath. And school happened the other days, so I knew for sure that wasn’t a Sabbath.

I like to think I had part of it right, though; the actual idea of respite—of rest and stillness. This unobtainable idea of rest that seems so far off. Some part of me understood that the way I had come to understand rest in my own life wasn’t quite the way the Jesus was advocating for rest to occur.

We’ll be looking at the Sabbath over the next three weeks in a brief series and today, we begin with the commandments. In our Deuteronomy reading today, we enter squarely into the middle of the re-telling of the ten commandments. Located within the larger arc of the whole of scripture, Deuteronomy is a sort of “second history”—a retelling of the story of Israel. And it functions basically as a guide-book to the previous 4 books of the Bible—this is the final recap and interpretation before we move into the books of the prophets. Deuteronomy, as a whole, is both a remembrance of Israel’s past *and* an anticipation of Israel’s future—the future of the people of God. The future we now find ourselves participating in, here in this place and beyond these walls.

And yet, to claim our place in the Sabbath, to acknowledge its importance and relevance for our lives, can seem odd. Often, the Sabbath is thought of as a Jewish thing—as something that should stay in Deuteronomy and holds little, if any, relevance for the modern Christian.

But, depictions of the sabbath are throughout the entirety of Scripture, from the commandments in Exodus and Deuteronomy to the depictions of Jesus and the disciples resting, both on the Sabbath and otherwise. This Divine Command to Rest is not isolated to the Hebrew scriptures or stuck in the long-ago past. We too are called to rest in this radical and world-changing way.

It is radical because it turns the normal orders and rhythms of life on their head. This radical Sabbath-rest was for all people, not just the wealthy or elite who could afford it. No, this rest was for the workers and the slaves and for the animals and livestock. This was God's culture-shifting reminder to the people of Israel that they were once an enslaved people and that God brought them out of Egypt and continues to watch over them and protect them. God has done this great work in taking the people out of slavery. This commandment goes a step further; in keeping Sabbath God takes the slavery out of the people. All the designations and value-marking comparisons that exist these other six days? They fall away on this one day and everyone simply exists. The people of Israel were brought out of Egypt, brought out of the land that measured them by their output or by their production and were brought into freedom. This commandment interrupts the cycle.

The Sabbath interrupts the cycle.

I'm sure I'm not mentioning something new here. Feeling overworked, too busy to take a break, too scheduled to rest, overbooked and measured by your output... That is the culture we exist within. And that is why this Biblical Sabbath is so important to us today—it offers a reminder that something is off in this cycle. A reminder that our worth is not measured exclusively by how much we produce each day, And a reminder that God loves us—that God commands us to rest because of this great love that God pours out for each one of us.

God looks at the ways we dehumanize ourselves and others in this culture of production and God longs for that to change. So, God commands us to rest. To stop and take stock of the world around us and to give our bodies and our souls a chance to rest.

That is the message we hear in the Gospel today as Jesus speaks. It's an invitation to rest; to rest in Jesus and to trust that in Jesus, the burdens of this world will be lightened. To give our souls a chance to rest. When we rest, when we actually give ourselves a chance to breathe and offer our burdens, however big or small they may be, to Jesus, we can begin to enter into a Sabbath observance—into the world-changing-radical shift that God offers.

This Gospel passage does not claim that in Jesus we will have no burdens. But it does claim comfort and assurance. Comfort that we do not carry these things alone and assurance that God is present with us in the midst of our burdens. The world is messy, and right now, it seems even messier than usual. And it is so easy to get caught up in this mess—to find ourselves overwhelmed with stories of violence and weighed down with angry rhetoric. To feel as though our burdens don't matter because they aren't as bad as some people have it. or that somehow, we're each individually responsible for saving the world.

Our readings today challenge that and they remind us of two things: The first—rest is necessary. Its holy and its sacred and it is one of the things that God desires for us. Rest from our phones and our emails, from the meetings and the over booked schedules. This rest, this Sabbath that we are each called into, is a sacred thing. It centers us in ourselves—it reminds us of our humanity and of our relationship with God. A God who continually cares for each of us.

And these readings too remind us of God's power: A God who liberated the people of Egypt from slavery and brought them into the promised land. A God who is capable and willing to take on our burdens and who walks with us each step of the way. A God who died and was resurrected and broke bread and ate fish with regular every-day-ordinary people. A God who is bigger than the burdens and the sins of this world and a God who is making this world new.

So today, I invite to remember that our God is bigger than any of the defining categories we might try to put God into and to remember that this command to observe the Sabbath is a recognition of our freedom and our personhood. And I invite you to truly hear the words of Jesus this morning: “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.”

Thanks be to God.

Amen.