



“Sabbath Time”

Text: Exodus 20:8-11

a sermon by Kevin Fleming

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FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

We begin with a quick tour this morning. This tour is not the places where I will be going, but the journey of an idea. That idea is “sabbath.” The word itself comes to us from the Hebrew - *shabbat* - which made its way through Latin and into English as “sabbath” - moving away from the plosive sounding “t” to the smoother fricative of “th.” From “shabbat” to “sabbath.”

The idea itself is built on the first story of creation in Genesis 1. It is there, after the day-by-day creation of all that is, that we read:

Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude. And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation. (Genesis 2:1-3)

“God rested on the seventh day.” God “shabbated” on the seventh day. God “sabbathed” on the seventh day.

But that story was most likely written during the days of the Babylonian exile, which means that the idea - and the practice - of sabbath probably came before the story from Genesis. It is sometimes hard for us to remember that the Bible is not written in a chronological manner. We do know that among the commandments - the *mitzvot* - given to Moses by God is a commandment regarding sabbath-keeping.

Remember the sabbath day and keep it holy. 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, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For 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. (Exodus 20:8-11)

The sabbath is a day separated from all the others for the purpose of rest and renewal. It was to be the seventh day - the completion of the week - a day when peace and well-being could be welcomed. In the worship of the synagogue, the "I'chah dodi" is a song of welcome for shabbat, in which one verse is sung, with the worshipers facing the door of the synagogue to welcome the sabbath, envisioned as a bride:

Enter in peace, O crown of your husband;

Enter in gladness, enter in joy.

Come to the people that keeps its faith.

Enter, O bride! Enter, O bride!

It is a beautiful and marvelous moment.

When I was growing up, the idea of sabbath was never presented as something all that important. In the subtle anti-Semitism of the day, and adhering more to the Protestant work ethic's promulgation, the idea of taking a day off was readily dismissed. We were reminded that we did not observe a sabbath. We observed "the Lord's Day" - the first day of the week on which Jesus was raised from the dead. Sabbath observance was dismissed as unnecessary, though we lived in a world of Sunday Blue Laws, when nothing was open - stores, movies, or anything else - so it was a great day to work in the yard and garden - providing you had gone to church.

Academia picked up the idea of sabbath time and before too long it was being experienced in a variety of settings. Tenured professors were offered some time away - usually in the seventh year - for rest, renewal, and even research. It was a break from the normal round of things - a time to break free of the dangerous and debilitating patterns that might have developed. Eventually, some in the church picked up the practice. Which brings us to this day.

As we are about to embark on our mutual sabbatical, there are a few lessons from which we can both take some instruction.

The first is this: rest is good. That may sound antithetical to our upbringing, which included hymns such as "Work for the Night Is Coming," the first verse of which instructed us:

Work, for the night is coming,
Work through the morning hours;
Work while the dew is sparkling,
Work 'mid springing flowers;
Work when the day grows brighter,
Work in the glowing sun;
Work, for the night is coming,
When man's work is done.

"Come, labor on, who dares stand idle on the harvest plain?"

Rescue the perishing,
Duty demands it;
Strength for thy labor the Lord will provide;
Back to the narrow way,
Patiently win them;
Tell the poor wand'rer a Savior has died.

Rest is good. Rest is necessary. Rest is a time of renewal and restoration. Sabbath time is rest time. Rest breaks the dangerous pattern of work, exhaustion, and fatigue that plague far too many of us. Rest is a gift from God.

The second lesson is this: sabbath time is discovery time. Sabbath time is a time when we can learn new things, experience new things, discover new things. Each of us - you here and me away - will be presented with many discoveries over the next three months. We will receive visions, dream dreams, and our imaginations will receive an influx of new possibilities. These are gifts from God, delivered to us by the Spirit. There are times when we can receive such gifts only when we are not distracted by all the host of things that preoccupy us. Sabbath time is Spirit time - time when the Spirit can visit us and we can receive the Spirit - time in which we gain new revelations and our eyes are opened to new potential ministries.

A final lesson is this: sabbath time can be frightening time. What will I do without you there for 11 Sundays? What will I do without the discipline of coming to the office and making the calls and doing the paperwork and all the rest? What will I do without the community of the church staff? And there will be corresponding frightening times for you. What if we don't like the preachers who will be here? What if people drift away while Kevin is gone? What if so-and-so gets sick or - God forbid - dies?

Everything is in place for every imaginable contingency. The Elders are ready to step up and lead. The Deacons are going to be doing extra work. The staff has their marching orders. Things will be more than alright.

If fear and anxiety show up, dismiss them with your best wishes and wait to hear what the Spirit offers instead.

So, we begin our journey. Other journeys begin and continue today.
The Spirit is among us - creating new possibilities - offering new dreams -
instilling new visions.

Sabbath time. Restful time. Renewing time. Discovery time. Spirit
time.

Enjoy your sabbatical. And I promise, I will enjoy mine.
Come, Spirit, come. For now and evermore. Amen.



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