

**“Keeping Sabbath”**

*Exodus 20:1-17; Isaiah 58: 13-14; Mark 2: 23-28*

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Today is Pentecost Sunday! It is one of those ‘Sabbath moments’ where the ceasing of activity leads to an encounter with God! That is what the word Sabbath means, to cease or to abstain from labour. Before Jesus ascended to heaven, he had been at the seashore with his disciples – met them for breakfast there because they had gone back to the work they knew, fishing - he instructed his disciples to go to Jerusalem and wait, and then...

*2 When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. 2 And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. 3 Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. 4 All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. (Acts 2: 1-4)*

This is what ceasing from their labour resulted in ... a different way of living.

We have been studying a book called *The Sacred Way* by Tony Jones over the past six weeks and referring to those practices in the Sunday messages. They are *Spiritual Practices for Everyday Life* – practices people through the ages have recorded in order to share their experiences of how they drew closer to God. This is the last of the Sunday Messages in this series. The last three chapters of the book were about making the sign of the cross and other forms of prayer using your body, about the Sabbath and about Service, and then the epilogue made recommendations for developing a “Rule of Life”, or consistent practices that help us develop our relationship with God and with our fellow human beings.

I am focusing primarily on the Sabbath as a practice; specifically keeping the Sabbath. Tony Jones tells us the word Sabbath means to “cease”, and in the Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament it says “abstinence from labour”. We take our example of rest from labour first from Genesis when God created for 6 days and rested on the 7<sup>th</sup> day and consecrated it, but later in Exodus, the Sabbath becomes a Commandment for the Israelites to follow – the fourth commandment. Here is what leads up to that:

Long, long ago and far away, a tremendous cry rose up from the earth... it came from the land of Egypt. Neighbouring countries might wonder why there would be any complaining coming out of Egypt; for it was a very wealthy country and the Pharaoh was making sure that they would be well provided for should another famine hit the land, like the one in the days when Joseph was in charge of the countries’ resources.

It was reported that the Pharaoh had a workforce that was labouring through long days to build more and more storage facilities for grain. Why would the people complain when the Pharaoh had their best interests in mind?

Still, the cry continued for it was from the labourers, the Israelites, the rag tag group of Jacob's descendants who had greatly multiplied (the same Jacob who was Joseph's father, in fact) the cry was so loud it reverberated through the heavens. It was a plea for help to the LORD to rescue them from a slavery that was becoming more and more unbearable. You see, Pharaoh had made them the labouring class after Joseph had passed away, to ensure that they would not take over the land. It wasn't so bad at first because the Israelites still had work and their daily needs were met. They had their own community and they still had time to worship God if they chose to. But as Pharaoh got increasingly greedy, he got more paranoid and passed a law that any newborn baby boys should be killed to keep the Israelites from getting too strong in number. And so it went from bad to worse: the work load was increased - now they had to find their own straw to make bricks and still keep up the same production levels (Exodus 5) and so, they had no time to worship God.

The Egyptians had many gods, and in fact the Pharaoh was thought to be the human representation of the Egyptian sun god *Ra*, the ones they primarily worshipped were greed and power. Their worship was preventing the Israelites from enjoying any time with God!

Those Israelite slaves in Egypt cried out for deliverance from their bitter oppression, where everything revolved around accumulating more and more and restlessness was perpetual at less cost to the ones in power and more cost to the vulnerable. There was no time for rest, no peace, no time to worship the LORD. The mission statement was "do more with less" for the poor and "give less, get more" for the rich.

The LORD heard their cries and responded. The LORD called Moses to lead the people out of the bondage of Egypt into freedom. And if you know the story of Moses you know he used 10 plagues to persuade the Pharaoh to "let God's people go".

Which plague do you remember best?<sup>1</sup> The ninth plague, the plague of darkness was very significant because it showed everyone that Israel's God was more powerful than the supposed sun god *Ra* and his earthly representative, Pharaoh.

In the end, we know that Pharaoh did let God's people go. Moses led the people, and the LORD was teaching them a new way of life – an alternative lifestyle; a lifestyle of trust in a covenantal relationship with Him. The antidote for the oppressive lifestyle in Egypt was the Ten Commandments which Moses received from the LORD at Sinai. And in the fourth commandment to take a Sabbath day there is a crucial bridge which connects all the commandments and offers the prescription for rest and peace: "Sabbath Peace" or "Shabbat Shalom". The fourth commandment connects the first 3 to the identity of the LORD, who brought

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<sup>1</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> plague – water turned to blood; 2<sup>nd</sup> plague – frogs; 3<sup>rd</sup> plague – knats; 4<sup>th</sup> plague – flies; 5<sup>th</sup> plague – livestock deceased; 6<sup>th</sup> plague – boils; 7<sup>th</sup> plague – thunder and hail; 8<sup>th</sup> plague – locusts; 9<sup>th</sup> plague – darkness; 10<sup>th</sup> plague – death of the firstborn (*Exodus 7 – 12*)

them out of slavery ... it offers rest from labour, from the restlessness of never having enough, always wanting more. And the LORD said, "Remember what it was like – you don't want to go back there – keep the Sabbath – it is a gift – for your good - I am providing for you."

The Fourth Commandment also reaches to the other six commandments demonstrating the relationship they are to have with others: ensure that everyone in the household or that you are in charge of gets Sabbath rest too, do not take what belongs to your neighbour, or to others, do not covet what they have. Be satisfied and love your neighbour as much as you love yourself – if they are vulnerable don't take advantage of your power over them for your gain, use it for their gain. Keeping the Sabbath includes making sure others are also able to keep it. Rest is not to come at the expense of other people. Remember the LORD freed you and gave you new life.

The theologian Walter Brueggeman wrote about keeping the *Sabbath as a resistance: saying no to the culture of now*, "It is drawn into the exodus narrative for the God who rests is the God who emancipates (frees) from slavery and consequently from the work system of Egypt and from the gods of Egypt who require and legitimate that work system."<sup>2</sup> The gods of Egypt are stand-ins for all the gods of the several empires of Assyria, Babylon or Persia who represent insatiable productivity.<sup>3</sup>

Do we remember? Do we, like the Israelites find it difficult to keep Sabbath? We live in a world that looks quite similar to Egypt. The practice of Sabbath is forgotten or explained away and the peace of rest is lost in the endless cycle of acquisition. Are we caught up in the Egyptian lifestyle – are we the Egyptians, the ones accumulating at the expense of others, or the Israelites, the ones slaving to survive, or a bit of both? I would hazard a guess there are days each one of us feels like we are captive in Egypt. I remember someone telling me once that keeping the Sabbath for them meant making sure they didn't do something that caused other people to work.

Keeping Sabbath is about building relationships with God –and with people. And the right relationship set out in the Ten Commandments brings peace, wholeness or completeness. Keeping Sabbath is about coming back into right relationship with God.

Not long ago, memories of Sabbath rest were coloured by strict rules of what you could not do, much like the Israelites as they developed their laws around the Sabbath. It may have felt like keeping the Sabbath was about doing the right things, or rather not doing anything, as opposed to rest from commerce and labour. If you grew up in the Reformed or Baptist, or other various protestant denominations, it might mean no soccer or baseball game in the park, no going to the store, no eating out, and going to church 2 or 3 times on Sunday. For most of us these 'rules' have loosened up greatly, if not disappeared altogether. If there is no understanding of why the rules were made, they may not be accepted. The prophet Isaiah gives us some good information on what it should look like:

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<sup>2</sup> Brueggemann, Walter. *Sabbath as resistance: saying no to the culture of now* (2014) Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, p.2

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.2

<sup>13</sup> If you refrain from trampling the sabbath,  
from pursuing your own interests on my holy day;  
if you call the sabbath a delight  
and the holy day of the LORD honorable;  
if you honor it, not going your own ways,  
serving your own interests, or pursuing your own affairs;<sup>[a]</sup>  
<sup>14</sup> then you shall take delight in the LORD,  
and I will make you ride upon the heights of the earth;  
I will feed you with the heritage of your ancestor Jacob,  
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.

Isaiah 58:13-14 (NRSV)

Not only at Pentecost does God reveal in Scripture as an example of what happens when there is Sabbath rest. The night Jesus is born... the Sabbath moment comes when evening night is split with a magnificent chorus of angels singing peace on earth and goodwill to all men – Shabbat shalom; the Lord is worshipped above all, the shepherds stop their work to go see the baby Jesus; the wise men stop their work to find the newborn king, to bring gifts, there is a ceasing from labour for those who are aware of that wondrous event when God comes to earth as a baby, Emmanuel – God with us! (and they share the good news!) The LORD again rescues his people, takes care of them and shows them an alternate way of life.

*During his ministry, [o]ne sabbath [Jesus] was going through the grainfields; and as they made their way his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. <sup>24</sup> The Pharisees said to him, “Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?” And he said to them, “Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need of food? He entered the house of God, when Abiathar was high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and he gave some to his companions.” Then he said to them, “The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath; so the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath.”* Mark 2:23-28

Then there is the Sabbath moment at Easter - the Resurrection of Jesus– Jesus rests in the tomb on the Sabbath day and then – Hallelujah! He is risen!

Sabbath rest is to get at the heart of the issue...to restore completeness ... but it's really about enjoying God and loving our neighbour as ourselves: loving ourselves enough to take a day of rest and trust God has all things in control and loving our neighbour like that too, so we offer them the same freedom we hope for; rest from labour, so we may delight in the Sabbath. The Sabbath is a gift to us. It leads to good things – encountering God in amazing ways and building relationships – proclaiming the Good News. Keeping Sabbath may not always be easy because sometimes we have to leave things behind that stop us from keeping Sabbath. But it is a Rule of Life worth holding on to – delight in the gift!

*All glory be to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit*