

Treasure Island: The Pause that Refreshes

Mark 2:23-3:6

June 6, 2021

Nearly 16 months ago when we locked down the church and went to work from home, I figured it would be a mini-sabbatical for two or three weeks until things settled down. I assumed it would be a time to all of us to take a deep breath and move at a slower pace, cancel a few meetings, catch up and get ahead. That may have been true for some, but you know the rest of the story! Health care professionals, first responders, teachers, grocery clerks, and countless essential workers toiled at a frenzied pace to the point of exhaustion. We are grateful for their sacrifices on our behalf. As the number of Covid cases decreases, I hope that those essential workers who have given so much of themselves are offered a significant pause to refresh body, mind, and spirit and to rekindle relationships that suffered as they gave so generously to others.

Sabbath is one of the treasures God has gifted humans on this “treasure island” we call Earth. It is a time of stepping back from the toxicity of life, to feel our feelings, and to gain some perspective. Too frequently, we bury the treasure of Sabbath beneath our busyness, our sense of self-importance, our fear and anxiety. We tend to base our worth and value upon our productivity. Simply being without doing is considered a waste of time. Many of us perceive ourselves as indispensable, but if we stop for one day a week, the world will go on without us.

In Exodus, one of the Ten Commandments says, “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.” The Hebrew word used for God’s resting literally means “to catch one’s breath.” Do that right now – catch your breath. Breathe deeply for a moment. I know it’s not the same through a mask, but when you take it off, breathe in the fresh breeze of God’s Holy Spirit. Exhale the worries and strain that clutter your spirit. Sabbath is a time for breathing deeply in sync with the Spirit of God. Abraham Heschel suggests that it took the creation of rest before the universe was complete. The pause for refreshment is part of the natural rhythm of life. And aren’t we grateful that today, for the first time in over 14 months we can celebrate the Sabbath worship of God together!

Deuteronomy’s version of the Ten Commandments offers a different reason for observing the Sabbath. The purpose is to “remember that you were a

slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm” (Deut. 5:15). After years of oppressive bondage as slaves in Egypt, the people are to remember the liberating acts of God. They were set free to live without the oppressive chains that held them down.

Deuteronomy tells us that there is a social and corporate dimension to Sabbath. Everyone deserves a rest from whatever oppresses them. Humans are not meant to work two or three jobs in order to survive; they need time for renewal of body, mind, and spirit. Each person has intrinsic value, not merely utilitarian worth. For some to cease labor for Sabbath, they need access to decent wages, affordable housing, and health care. Some need to be freed from various forms of discrimination. The Sabbath is not just for us to enjoy. We need to work so that Sabbath renewal might be available to all God’s people.

There is a dual purpose to Sabbath. It is meant to renew God’s people for service and work and Sabbath is intended to liberate and free God’s people from oppression. With this background, we turn to the reading from Mark’s Gospel. As a Jew, Jesus practices Sabbath. He knows the reasons for Sabbath. He also knows that there are exceptions to the prohibition to work. For example, in the Hebrew tradition it is acceptable to free animals from danger or to tend to a human life in peril. However, in the minds of the Pharisees, plucking grain and healing a withered hand stretch the exceptions. Therefore, they challenge Jesus.

Jesus does have a tendency to push the limits. He is not condemning the law, but returning to its original meaning. The law is meant to give life. The Sabbath is meant for creation and liberation. It is about grace, not punishment. It is about doing good, not harm. It is about saving life, not destroying life.

Our nation has had Blue laws restricting certain activities, especially shopping hours, on Sundays. Those laws were fashioned to allow for Christian worship on Sundays, although other faith traditions worship on other days of the week. Laws prohibiting retail and business activity provided opportunity for all persons to have a day of rest from labor, a Sabbath day for spiritual renewal. A few states continue to prohibit car dealerships from selling vehicles on Sundays. There would be a great revolt if we sought to legislate a weekly day of rest these days, but it would probably be a wise move for the physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being of all persons. At the very least, we can advocate for work weeks and living wages that allow all persons a day of renewal.

I heard that the zoo in Tokyo closed for two months each year in order to give the animals a rest from visitors. If even the animals need a break from the human species, perhaps humans also need such a break!

As the world resumes activity, it is important that we heed the call to Sabbath. Instead of simply filling our schedules with all the activities we have missed, we can be intentional about claiming a rhythm of rest and action, play and work, Sabbath and ministry, letting go and taking on. We can also be mindful of the need for Sabbath renewal for parents, teachers, health care workers, food service providers, and others upon whom we depend. How will you build Sabbath time into your rhythm going forward? How might we assist others in finding Sabbath time for renewal?

The Sabbath commandment is grounded in God's call – the call to attend to the heartbeat of God and the call to serve our neighbor. It would serve humankind for everyone to have a day of rest from labor and to delight in the gifts of our Creator God.

May we treasure the gift of Sabbath, resting in God's presence and enjoying the gift of relationship. May we desire Sabbath time for all God's children to rest from their labors and soak in the love and life-renewing presence of our God.

Creator God, You so fashioned the rhythms of life that there are cycles of winter and summer, daylight and nighttime, work and rest. We stand in awe at the wondrous design of the universe. We give you thanks and praise that we are the blessed recipients of your handiwork.

In this season of new beginnings, make us thoughtful and wise about new patterns. Guide us to incorporate Sabbath renewal into each day and each week. Anchor us in your steadfast presence that we might

We pray for those in need of a deep rest and renewal: parents, teachers, health professionals, and other essential workers. Massage their weary bodies and refresh their spirits. Shower them with the gratitude of many.

We pray for the multitudes who grieve the loss of life to Covid-19. Hold them tenderly in your loving care.

We weep with and for victims of gun violence and their loved ones. Enter into their deep pain to share their anguish and hold them in their despair. Move in the hearts of those drawn to violence, offering healing for their hurt. Renew in your people a sense of respect for the sacred nature of life.

Guide your church, O God, that we might be a reservoir of renewal, hope, energy, and justice. Grow a spirit of unity as First UMC discerns its future. Abide with Pastor Janette and Pastor Peter as they move and prepare to lead this congregation. Keep us faithful to the way of Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.