

Sermon: Sabbath

New North Church, Hingham

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Based on **Genesis 2:1-3; Mark 2:23-27**

The early Christians affirmed Hebrew Scripture as their Bible but in doing so raised some questions, one of which was how to interpret the Sabbath.

This is important because keeping the Sabbath was one of God's commandments, as specified in Exodus 20, which says:

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).

God blessed the sabbath day and made it holy, as a gift to us all, for our refreshment and enjoyment, forever. Who are we to argue?

Of the Ten Commandments, this one about keeping the Sabbath is the most elaborately stated. So, what is the Sabbath, anyway?

Seventy years ago, Abraham Heschel wrote a somewhat metaphysical book about the Sabbath and its meaning. For Heschel, the Sabbath celebrates time rather than space. We and the world we live in occupy space; God occupies time. God is forever. In fact, in Haitian Creole, the word for the LORD is *l'eternel*, the Eternal One.

Heschel wrote that, "On the Sabbath, we experience time in its essence, and hence we taste eternity, because time is eternity in disguise."¹ But everything we know exists in both time and space. Judaism doesn't make a distinction between the two; they go together. Judaism's real concern is the distinction between the holy and the profane.

In our world, most of us are preoccupied with life in the here and now, with paying our bills, or making weekend plans with our friends, getting our kids to a soccer game, or with finding our next meal. We tend to forget that God has given us a gift, which is to find rest with God from all that we do six days a week – and to keep it holy.

There is a section in Jeremiah 17 that deals with the consequences of Israel having failed to keep the sabbath. Failure to do so was a symptom of the people's general alienation from God. Keeping the sabbath, on the other hand, was linked to the restoration of the Davidic dynasty.

Here is a small section of what Jeremiah said about keeping the sabbath:

'Thus says the Lord: For the sake of your lives, take care that you do not bear a burden on the sabbath day or bring it in by the gates of Jerusalem. And do not carry a burden out of your houses on the sabbath or do any *work*, but keep the sabbath day holy, as I commanded your ancestors. Yet they did not listen...' (Jeremiah 17:21-23b)

Jeremiah did not define what constituted a 'burden,' but he preached that failure to keep the sabbath combined with a nation-wide alienation from God were part of why the kingdom fell, and why the people were exiled to Babylon. No wonder the Pharisees were so uptight when there were Roman soldiers everywhere.

Mark's predominantly Gentile church was beginning to get away from the Jewish meaning of Sabbath. They had begun to replace the Sabbath with the "Lord's Day" on the Christian first day of the week – Sunday.² In today's reading, Mark shows how controversial the Sabbath had thus become for them.

When the Pharisees challenged Jesus about his disciples 'doing what is not lawful,' they meant, technically speaking, 'not according to the revelation of God's will in the Torah.' The Sabbath as tradition had nothing to do with it; it was the Law.

In the next story, again in the synagogue, the controversy is about healing on the Sabbath – is it lawful to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill? Jesus healing the man with the withered hand caused the Pharisees to go out and immediately conspire with the Herodians on how to destroy him.³ This is getting ahead of the story, but we can see how keeping the Sabbath was a very big deal.

So, when Jesus reminds the Pharisees of how King David handled a similar situation by breaking the Sabbath to feed hungry people, they had no answer for that, and then Jesus told them something *they* should have already known, but perhaps Mark's Gentile audience did not, so Mark told us too, that the sabbath was made for humans, and not the other way around.

Notice that neither Jesus nor the disciples ate the grain, nor did they do any work. All that has happened here is that Jesus reaffirmed the Sabbath as God's gift to humanity.

Scripture reminds us that all holiness comes from God. Samuel's mother Hannah prayed, "There is no Holy One like the LORD, no one besides you" (1 Sam 2:2). In Leviticus, God calls on Israel to be holy, saying, "For I am the LORD who brought you up from the land of Egypt, to be your God; you shall be holy, for I am holy" (Lev 11:45).

The Sabbath commandment doesn't say that humans can make time holy. It says to *remember* the Sabbath day, to *keep* it holy (Exodus 20:8). God made the Sabbath for people; if we are to benefit from it, we need to remember it and keep it holy.

We are called to rest on the Sabbath, not to work, or pursue our own interests, or to do evil. We cannot make ourselves holy, but by keeping the Sabbath holy, God promises to make us holy, to share in God's holiness. The Sabbath is about redemption. This is what Scripture tells us.

It was said that during the American Civil War, success in battle came to those generals who refrained from fighting on the Sabbath even as the war itself was seen as God's retribution for the sin of slavery. Despite the immensity of the struggle, there remained lines that some people just would not cross.

In a contemporary review of Heschel's book, Ira Eisenstein wrote, "Professor Heschel has written another volume in his impeccable and epigrammatic style, one which will undoubtedly delight those smaller circles who understand him and bewilder the larger groups who undertake to read him."⁴ It's a short review and Eisenstein takes Heschel to task for not leading his readers back to a meaningful Sabbath, but that's not what Heschel had planned to do. And maybe for good reason: it may simply be impossible for us to get the full meaning of Sabbath without experiencing it for ourselves.

Years after publishing his book, Heschel was speaking at a synagogue about the Sabbath. He said that the Ten Commandments have been translated from Hebrew into hundreds of languages. But one word could not be translated, not in any one of those hundreds of languages. None had an equivalent word for the original Hebrew word (שַׁבָּת). And that is how, in English, we have 'sabbath.'

When we observe the Sabbath, we are reunited with fellow believers throughout time, with our families, with Christians throughout history, with Jesus and his disciples, and with the Hebrews of the Old Testament, all the way back to Creation, when God 'hallowed' the seventh day as a day of rest.⁵

Even God observed the Sabbath. That tells us something about the importance of divine rest and renewal. When God strolled through the Garden in the cool of the day, looking for the man and the woman to talk to, that was Sabbath. It's a time when the only thing left to do is to just *be* with friends and family and God.

Amen.

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¹ Abraham J. Heschel, *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man* (Farrar, Straus, and Young, Inc., New York, 1952)

² Boring, M. Eugene. *Mark: a Commentary* (Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, 2006), 87.

³ Mark 3:1-6

⁴ Eisenstein, Ira. "Of Time and the Sabbath." *The Reconstructionist* 18, no. 1 (February 22, 1952), 23-24.

⁵ Michael Rogness, "The Sabbath: Holy Time." *Word & World* 36, no. 3 (Summer 2016), 285-291.