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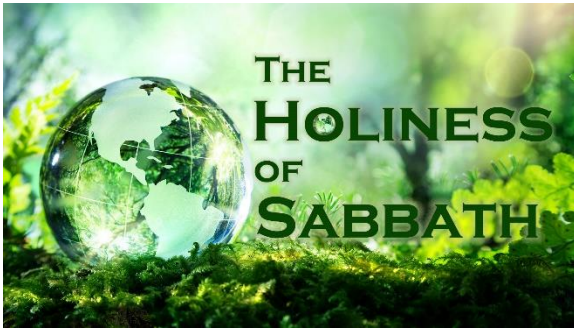
Title: The Holiness of Sabbath

Preaching: Deb Strock-Kuss, Associate Minister

Text: [Genesis 2:2-3](#)

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I got my hair cut this past Wednesday. The appointment was scheduled 6 weeks ago for early that morning. But on Tuesday morning, with the help of a conversation with Pastor Danny, I realized I'd double-booked myself – again. Wednesday morning was our Weekday Ministries preschool open house. I was needed, and I wanted to welcome everyone to the open house. After all, I had bought the

t-shirt and everything!

So, I contacted Kris at the hair salon and asked if we could change the time of my appointment. She is a very kind and gracious woman, and my appointment was moved to 11:00.

As I raced into the salon at 10:59 that day, Kris said, "So, how's the morning been?"

"It's been terrific! I loved greeting all those very excited children and their parents and grandparents. It was great. Of course, I'm extra behind now on my sermon preparation for Sunday, but that's all good. I've got this..."

"What are you preaching about," she asked. Oh – a potential trap for any minister who doesn't know if her hairdresser is a person of faith ~ much less a Christian, or if she is just being polite in asking the question. How does one answer? In broad generalities or with a more detailed explanation?

"Oh, well," I said, "um, well, because it's Labor Day weekend, I'm preaching about Sabbath ~ you know, that 7th day of Creation when God rested and took sabbath. It's about the value and importance of the sabbath in all our lives and how important it is to take that time for our mental health and our sense of space and time, and the benefits for our relationships and our creativity to blossom and all that."

"Oh really!" she said. "I was just reading about that in my devotions this morning. From Hebrews, chapter 4. (Ah...she's a Christian. OK...) I have this Life

Applications Bible that gives me some things to think about at the bottom of each page. It was about Sabbath just this morning.”

And we were off and running with a whole theological discussion of Sabbath and its importance. Later, on Wednesday evening, after Kris had had a chance to get home, she shared with me a text image of the reading from Hebrews chapter 4 along with the commentary beneath it in her Bible.

How kind of her! And I was reminded yet again:

One never knows the opportunity one might have to share her faith. Just have to have the door opened to the possibility, even at the hairdresser.

Sabbath. From the 2nd chapter of Genesis, verses 2 and 3
I paraphrase:

Thus the heavens and the earth and everything in them were completed. On the seventh day God brought to an end all the work God had been doing; on the seventh day, having finished all the work, God blessed the day and made it holy, because it was the day God finished all the work of creation. Genesis 2:2-3
(Paraphrased)

This account of the creation – this first Creation story, found in Genesis 1 and the first few verses of chapter 2, is described in lots of ways: as poetry, liturgy, poetic theology, a proclamatory sermon, as literal truth, and as metaphorical explanation of the natural order of how the world came to be.

God is the narrator in this story. God said stuff like, “Let there be light,” and there was light. God said, “Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters to separate the water below from the water above,” and there was sky. God said, “Let the waters under the sky be gathered together,” and there were oceans and lakes and rivers and ponds ~ and land.

And God said, “Let the earth put forth vegetation,” and then “Let there be lights in the dome of the sky to separate day from night,” and then “Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures and let birds fly above the earth across the dome of the sky,” and then, “Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind: cattle and creeping things and wild animals of the earth of every kind.”

God said all this stuff, they came into being, and it was so.
And God saw that it was good.

God did all this in 5 ½ days. Whew! But God wasn’t done – not yet. Because THEN God said, “*Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness, and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air,*

and over the cattle and over all the wild animals of the earth and over every creeping thing on the earth.” Genesis 1:26 (NRSV)

And so God created humankind in God’s image, male and female, they were created. And it was very good.

I know you think that God was done creating when God created “US.” Look around you. It’s all there, right? Darkness. Light. Water. Sky. Land. Plants. Animals on the ground. Animals in the waters. And finally, a creature to have dominion over it all – to be caretakers of the entire planet and all the stuff on and around it. You would think that God was done.

But a closer reading of Genesis reveals that the Sabbath was not simply a day off. Ancient versions of this text reveal that “On the seventh day God finished God’s work.” Say what? Wait...God rested on the seventh day.

Turns out that ancient rabbis teach that on the seventh day, God created. God did not stop but created *menuha* – tranquility, serenity, peace, in the deepest sense of fertile, healing stillness; rest. Until the Sabbath, creation was unfinished. With the birth of *menuha*, the circle of creation was made full and complete.

From the New Revised Standard Version of Scripture: “*On the seventh day, God finished the work that he had done, and he rested (menuha) 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 (menuha) from all the work that he had done in creation.*” Genesis 2:2-3

Those ancient storytellers of this timeless story recognized the importance and value of Sabbath. They write that this 7th day was not only blessed but also hallowed ~ hallowed = made holy, consecrated, made sacred.

The notion of Sabbath is one of the 10 commandments, found in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5. The 3rd commandment reads like this: “*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 ... 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 20:8ff NRSV

The commandment gives instruction as to the importance of taking sabbath. Why? Why is it so important? How can “resting” be any kind of productive? In our culture, productivity is paramount, right? Productivity is what brings about a higher yield, a greater number, more ~ and so to be DOING, to be WORKING, to be PRODUCING one way or another is what we’re supposed to be about ~ right?

Tomorrow is Labor Day. The holiday originated in the year 1894. The Pullman Strike was a widespread railroad strike and boycott of all Pullman Company rail cars. It disrupted rail traffic in the US Midwest from May through July that year.

Among the reasons for the strike were the absence of democracy of the Pullman Company and its politics; the rigid paternalistic control of the workers, excessive water and gas rates, and a refusal by the company to allow workers to buy and own their own homes. When the strike got violent that June and 13 workers died, President Grover Cleveland made reconciliation with the labor movement a top political priority, and Labor Day as a national holiday was born in September of 1894.

We have been recognizing and honoring the American laborer ever since – tomorrow will be the 127th Labor Day recognition in the United States.

What better time to preach about Sabbath? When we honor Sabbath, we are aware, at a very deep and basic level, that human beings cannot survive very long or very well on a steady diet of nothing but work. We need to play. We need re-creation. There is a reason why the phrase, "working ourselves to death" is part of our cultural lexicon.

Unfortunately, we often seem to forget this important truth. We have inherited a "work ethic" in our culture which frequently leaves us feeling guilty about any time not spent in the pursuit of something "productive."

All too often we have taken to heart the message that if it isn't making money, if it isn't increasing "the numbers" or making things bigger and better, then it is of little value. And so, we spend our lives in pursuit, in frantic pursuit of fulfillment, never quite recognizing that it remains elusive as long as our definition of fulfillment is so skewed. We are like Martha – so busy with our "important" work that we fail to notice we have Jesus sitting in our living room.

Wayne Muller wrote an excellent book, "*Sabbath: Finding Rest, Renewal, and Delight in Our Busy Lives.*" He describes things this way:

In the relentless busyness of modern life, we have lost the rhythm between work and rest. All life requires a rhythm of rest.

- *There is a rhythm in our waking activity and the body's need for sleep.*
- *There is a rhythm in the way day dissolves into night, and night into morning.*
- *There is a rhythm as the active growth of spring and summer is quieted by the necessary dormancy of fall and winter.*

- *There is a tidal rhythm, a deep eternal conversation between the land and the sea.*
- *In our bodies, the heart perceptibly rests after each life-giving beat; the lungs rest between the exhale and the inhale.*

We have lost this essential rhythm. Our culture invariably supposes that action and accomplishment are better than rest; that doing something – anything – is better than just “being still”.

- *Because of our desire to succeed, to meet these ever-growing expectations, we do not rest.*
- *Because we do not rest, we lose our way.*
- *We miss the compass points that would show us where to go,*
- *we bypass the nourishment that would sustain us. We miss the quiet that would give us wisdom*
- *we miss the joy and love born of effortless delight.*
- *We miss out on menuha.*

Poisoned by the belief that good things come only through unceasing determination and tireless effort, we can never truly rest. And for want of rest, our lives are in danger. In the drive for success, we are seduced by the promise of “more, more, more!” Even when our intentions are noble and good, the corrosive pressure of frantic overactivity can nonetheless cause suffering in ourselves and others.

So a “successful” “productive” life has become a kind of violent enterprise! It’s like we are waging a war...

- *on our bodies, pushing them beyond their comfortable limits,*
- *a war on our most cherished relationships, because we cannot find the time to be with others;*
- *waging a war on our spirits because we are too preoccupied to listen to the quiet voices that seek to nourish and refresh us;*
- *and war on our communities, because we are fearfully protecting what we have and do not feel safe enough to be kind and generous;*
- *we are fighting with the earth, because we cannot take the time to place our feet on the ground and allow it to feed us, to taste its blessings, and give thanks!*

When the rhythm and balance of work and rest are askew, we do not succeed. We fail!

There is another very critical reason that the discipline of Sabbath is important. Not only do we need rest from our labors, but the world around us is in a particularly heavy oppressive state right now, isn't it? There is so much happening that feels beyond our control, creating all sorts of grief, anger, and worry in our souls;

- the crisis caused by war in Afghanistan,
- the crisis caused by natural disasters in Haiti,
- the crises caused by a heating planet in raging fires across North America and hurricanes that devastate the southeast,
- to say nothing of an ongoing global pandemic.

And on and on. It's a lot. It's too much for us to know what to do with it – how to react; how to respond in good ways.

Recently, my sister sent me an article written by Rev. Bart Smith, pastor of St. Mark's Presbyterian Church in Tucson, Arizona. Bart was writing about the pressurized chaos of all that surrounds us every waking moment. The word he discovered that describes this state of things is a German word: *uberhaufen*. It means to besiege, inundate, swamp. In other words, it means piling things one on top of the other on top of the next.

It's too much! And the fatigue that we are buried under measures very high and we utter the Psalmist's prayer, "How long, O Lord?" It is exhausting.

So our lack of rest is not just a personal choice kind of thing. It surrounds us from all directions. It colors the way we build and sustain community. It dictates the way we respond to suffering and shapes how we seek peace and healing in the world.

When we forget to rest, to be still, to take Sabbath, our lives fall out of balance and spin out of control. And the resulting damage affects not only us, but those around us, and indeed the whole planet.

"For everything there is a season." We do not honor God by working ourselves to death or by worrying endlessly.

Jesus said, "Come unto me all you who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest." And so, on this Labor Day weekend, I invite you to engage in a deep and significant spiritual practice:

- take a nap
- play with your children or your parents, your grandchildren or your grandparents
- go for a walk
- do absolutely nothing at all

Rest in the eternal and abiding arms of God.

Let Us Pray: