

SCRIPTURE for Time with Children: Mark 2:23-28

One sabbath he was going through the cornfields; and as they made their way his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. 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.'

SCRIPTURE for Sermon: Isaiah 58:13-14

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; 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.

SERMON: "Drawing Near" The Rev. Brent Damrow

One of my favorite geek days of the entire year should come as no surprise. I love Christmas. And I do, not actually for the flurry of kids running down the stairs, not really the franticness of paper flying across the room, not really for the joy of family or the abundance of food or the day that is just so full, even though I love all of that. I love it because, of all days on the calendar, it is the only reliable day I have ever found, that when I leave my house in all that hustle and bustle, when I go out the door for a moment, it is the only day that the world – all of us – seems to slow down and stop and cease.

There was a year, a hard year, a year when I was alone on Christmas, and I went to Camden, my place of refuge. And on that Christmas morning when I woke up without even the possibility of anyone coming down the stairs, I decided to go out for a walk. On the ground was a layer of snow. The sky was that perfect blue, you know, that you get in winter. And I heard the creak of the door behind me shut. And then, nothing. I walked for two hours that morning. I did not see one plane in the sky. I did not see one car or delivery truck or anything pass me by. I did not encounter another human being. I did not even hear a dog bark. And this is in a town of about 6,000 people. Two hours of utter quiet. And it was stunning.

It makes sense. No one was delivering because no one wanted a delivery. No one was fixing anything because no one wanted anything fixed. No one was running out to grab a coffee because none of the coffee shops were open. The thing is that Christmas morning works, not because I decided it was special, or not even because some of us or most of us do, but because everyone did.

At the heart of Isaiah's theology, at the heart of this 58<sup>th</sup> chapter, is a notion of all the people – *all* the people. The "you" in Isaiah in this chapter is always plural – it is all y'all. This is a communal command about observing the Sabbath, because what Isaiah knew is that for these

things of deep importance, for these things that really matter, it's good for us to do it on our own, but it is so much better when we do it together, because then it ripples out to everything. This is not a "going your own way," but a collective way, and the way of the whole.

I asked our deacon this morning to read the reading in a particular way because Isaiah is fundamentally an if/then kind of guy. Remember he's a prophet, so he speaks for God, so I'm imagining that God is an if/then kind of guy. Repeatedly through Isaiah, he uses the terms "if this happens, then that will happen." But I don't think it's a point system. I don't think it's a reward system. I don't think God is up there saying "Oh, well, John Canning observed Sabbath today, so I'm going to reward him." I think the truth of the if/then of Isaiah, the truth of the if/then for us, is that it just speaks of if we really do this, not kind of, not give lip service to it, but *if* we really do it *then* this way of living will break forth like the dawn. Isaiah usually has a "then" that is just "it naturally will be," "it will come to this fulfillment." If, friends, we live Sabbath the way that we should live, then we will naturally take delight in the Lord for all of the goodness.

Brother David Steindl-Rast is becoming a touchstone for me. He says that everything, every day, every breath, everything is a gift. And the moment we accept everything is a gift, even this whole Sabbath day, is the moment that we then take delight in the Lord. Everything becomes good, and God's goodness becomes everything in us. "And I will make you ride upon the heights of the earth," Isaiah proclaims.

God says I will bring you up and I will show you all that is good. I will make you ride on those moments like that morning in Camden where everything was quiet and good, despite the fact that at that moment my life was anything but. I will take you up and lift you above it all, and let you ride it out. If you rest for the sake of goodness, you will not just find fleeting goodness, but you will encounter the goodness of God.

It isn't just David Steindl-Rast who looks at time as a gift. There is a wonderful woman, Dorothy Bass, who wrote a book called "Receiving the Day." And she actually commends the Jewish way of observing Sabbath over the Christian way in at least one regard. In the Jewish tradition, you have an evening of Sabbath, you go to bed already in Sabbath. You have let everything go that you might get a good night's sleep, and that you might wake up already in Sabbath. Dorothy Bass says that when we receive time as a gift rather than something we are supposed to make use of, it changes how we look at it. It becomes a blessing.

Steindl-Rast comments that the word "busy" in the Chinese language is made of two characters. Are you ready for what they are? One of them is "heart." The other one – and I love it – is "killing." In Chinese when they wanted to write the word "busy" they wrote "heart killing." How many of you have been too busy lately? How many of you need a time and chance to simply rest and be? My husband Jon was telling me about an article he read the other day where someone wrote that they imagined that if they had a year of doing nothing, they might, they just might find their way back to goodness.

Thomas Merton offers this thought. He takes it a step further, saying that this busy-ness of ours, whether we're doing it for work or vocation or even, Merton warns, if we're doing it for the sake of serving others, that this form of busy-ness is actually a form of violence. It takes an onslaught

against self, family and soul. Here's what he writes: "To allow oneself to be carried away by a multitude of conflicting concerns, to surrender to too many demands, to commit oneself to too many projects, even to want to help everyone in everything, is to succumb to violence." He says that "the frenzy of our activism can neutralize our work for peace. Our desire to do everything for the world, or even for our kids, can betray the very gift that we are trying to give them."

I'm quoting a whole lot of people today because I want you to be convinced that Sabbath is this jumble of ideas of beauty.

Wayne Muller, another person that I've enjoyed reading about, worries about the world, and not just about the world, he worries about you, us church folk, who have mission statements like we do to be the love of Christ in the world. It's a pretty big mission. He reminds us that in our youth we often saw the world as so full of possibility and promise. He also reminds us that sometimes in church or the world, in the midst of all our striving and grasping for things, even things of goodness, we let joy and delight slip through the process and right out of our fingers.

Somebody in our morning prayer group this past week lifted a prayer of thanksgiving for this church and for all it does, followed by an honest admission that sometimes it can feel like too much. Muller offers a simple reason. He says we've simply forgotten the Sabbath, not just as a day, but as Isaiah said a collective way of understanding human structure and living that takes us out of survival mode and into a word I'm going to coin right now – *thrival* mode.

Sabbath remembers the need for all living things to lie dormant. I always worry when I bring up gardening examples, because there are master gardeners in the congregation. But I understand that for fruit trees, if they aren't allowed to go dormant in the winter, they don't produce fruit the next year. If they don't go dormant the second year, not only do they not produce fruit but they get weaker. If they go enough years without going dormant, they die. For their purpose is to bear fruit. Our purpose is to bear fruit for our loved ones, for our family and the world. When was the last time you were dormant? When was the last time you took a day to light candles, to sing songs, to nap, to eat, to make love, to do the things that make life worth living? Isaiah says that we must give up wanting to go our own ways, and instead delight in the way that Christ shows us.

Sabbath is the fourth commandment. It is the bridge commandment. It is the commandment that holds all ten together. Remember when Jesus was asked about the commandments? He said Love God and Love your neighbor. The Sabbath commandment is right between those two things. The first three commandments are all about how we love God. The last six commandments are all about how we love neighbor. The fourth commandment is what makes either of those things possible.

The risk of looking at Sabbath as something we must do is that it becomes yet another "must." Walter Brueggemann invites us to look at God, that God who rested and that God who said to rest, and tells us that the remaining holy part of that fourth commandment is about remembering our God. He claims that to take Sabbath on Sunday is revolutionary in the extreme because it remembers, unlike Pharaoh, unlike your boss, unlike this world, our God says enough is enough, that there is a time to simply stop. It can wait.

Tony Robinson in a recent devotional said that a young mother who comes to church, who is stressed out beyond all measures of things, who knows how much there is to do in any day, the last thing she needs is someone in a robe like me to be telling her one more thing she needs to do. I talk about how we live our life as church because I do believe that with every breath we are called to live our faith. But Robinson is right. What we need to remember sometimes on a day like this is that God comes to us, that we don't need on Sabbath to go to God. We just need to stop going, so that we realize that God is already right here. God comes looking for us when we're lost. God comes seeking us when we're exhausted. God comes willing to yoke Godself to us when we're pulling a heavy load.

Which brings me back to Christmas, and all of that quiet. There are wonderful traditions on Christmas about how we enact God's giving to us. Those gifts, those meals, all of that is beautiful. But here is what I want you to remember. Christmas is not about any of that. Fundamentally, it's about remembering that God came to us, in fragile love, just asking us to slow down, stop for a moment, and let it be.

This is the Sabbath day. Can we at least agree that for this day we will stop the heart killing? Can we at least for this day allow ourselves not to draw near to God but allow God's heart to draw near to us? Allow us to simply be held in God's embrace? For God says in Isaiah that I will take you above this world, and I will show you the beauty of it all.

Remember this, friends. "Drop thy still dews of quietness 'til all our strivings cease. God, take from our souls the strain and stress and let our simple, let our restful, let our ordered lives confess the beauty of thy peace." Amen.