

A Holy Rhythm of Mission and Sabbath

Meta

Location: Apostles Anglican Church

Date: July 2, 2023

Readings

Exodus 34.21-24, 27-28

Psalm 145.1-13

Hebrews 4.1-9

Mark 2.23-28

Opening

If you're one of those individuals who reads ahead to see where the lectionary is going, you'll notice that our readings today *aren't* in the lectionary. The *regularly* scheduled readings for the Fifth Sunday of Pentecost in the year of our Lord 2023 were not a natural match for a rector's final Sunday before a four month sabbatical, so I called an audible. Just the first verses of the Old Testament and Gospel readings themselves, holy and inspired words of scripture though they be, are not exactly the parting reflections I had in mind for this occasion. Consider the opening words from Isaiah 2.10:

Enter into the rock and hide in the dust from before the terror of the LORD, and from the splendor of his majesty.

And then there is the opening verse from Matthew 10.34, one of the hard sayings of our Lord Jesus:

Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.

Not exactly the 'farewell for now' words I imagined. I've preached on these difficult passages a handful of times the past 16 years here, though they didn't exactly express my heart on this occasion.

I gladly embrace the lectionary as the rule of the church, but it is not an inviolable law. Let us recall another scriptural principle, 'for every time there is a season.' So it seemed to me that other scriptural themes are more fitting for this moment, my final Sunday here until I return to Apostles on Christ the King Sunday, November 26th.

As I've prepared for this time of personal sabbath, I was surprised to find my thoughts gravitating, not only to months ahead, but to many years past. I began thinking about my first year serving as rector, when my role changed from assistant rector to rector. Some of you who were here when I became rector in 2012 may recall a ministry theme we had for a season—'A Holy Rhythm of Mission and Sabbath.' We had a sermon series on that topic, studies on a sabbath way of life, both in formation courses and among our staff.

In the midst of reflecting on Apostles ten years ago, I then began thinking about individuals and families who have joined Apostles in the past 2-3 years: have our newcomers experienced an emphasis on a sabbath way of life that so shaped us a decade ago? I can think of a few occasions in the past few years we've focused on practicing sabbath, but we haven't had a sustained focus as in past years.

So hear my heart for us this morning. Not just for my personal faith entering a season of rest, but my heart for our parish, our collective life in Christ as a church: I don't ever want to cease pursuing this holy rhythm of mission and sabbath. They belong together. This holy rhythm of mission and sabbath is not a vision reserved only for those in full-time ministry; it is a vision for the whole people of God. Moses may have been appointed to listen especially for God's voice for that 40 day period on the mountain; to behold his presence and gaze on the Lord's glory, but then he declares the sabbath rhythm, not only for himself, but for the whole nation: 'Six days you shall work, but on the seventh day you shall rest.'

As I enter this season focused on listening to the Lord's voice, focusing on his presence, contemplating his beauty, I enter the days ahead conscious that these days are not only about self-care. I believe the season apart, devoted entirely to the Lord's presence, has a specific purpose for us; that we can collectively embrace this sabbath way of life in our time, difficult though it be, a holy rhythm of mission and rest.

Practicing Sabbath in Seedtime and Harvest

Look with me once more at Exodus 34 on page ### of your pew Bible. I'd like to meditate on the second half of this opening verse again. There's an important phrase, a blink-and-you'll-miss-it half verse about sabbath practice that is no *minordetail*.

Six days you shall work, but on the seventh day you shall rest. In plowing time and in harvest you shall rest.

Anyone who works in agriculture or even amateur gardeners like myself know that plowing time—seedtime—means intensive work. Winter means more opportunity for rest, but springtime means an rapid escalation of work. And it's precisely in those critical days, that season when the work quickly increases that the Lord says , 'In plowing time you shall rest.' You shall pause when your chores double. You shall establish a rhythm of labor and rest when your anxious mind ruminates on all that is *undone*.

I don't know the rhythm *between* seedtime and harvest on a farm, but I know for my modest little garden that it's a nice, brief reprieve, a natural opportunity for rest, once seedlings and young plants are planted and growing in the garden. It's light tending for a month and then pow! When the harvest comes, it's full on.

I wasn't ready for just how labor-intensive harvest times are. There's constancy to harvesting that I greatly underestimated. It's good stress, but good stress is still stressful. Overall, it's joyful and fun to work in a time of abundance—to eat fresh food that's grown on your own ground, to share with friends and neighbors the overabundance that you can't eat or won't fit in your refrigerator.

All this from a hobby gardener. How much more gravity the instruction must mean for a nation of subsistence farmers when the God, who created them and sustains them, says, 'in harvest you shall rest.' When you're blessed by healthy growth, bringing back loads of fruit and vegetables in the trug every single day; when you're storing food for the lean months ahead, you must also embrace rest. Let not productivity become your god. Let not your joyful moments, the days of flourishing keep you from worship. In harvest you shall rest.

By the grace of God, and only by the Lord's grace, Apostles is growing and we're growing in the right ways. Yes, we're growing numerically, that is evident from one Sunday to another. We have more children in our children's ministry than any other time in our church's existence.

Even more importantly, we're growing in spiritual community. I see friendships beginning and increasing, what the Scriptures call *koinonia*, a genuine sharing of life together. I see a deeper commitment to the neighborhoods around our church, serving neighbors through Cedarbrook. I see artists composing new works, in song, in painting, uniting their artistic gifts and their love of Jesus. We're seeking spiritual depth, studying the Scriptures together on Sundays and in smaller groups throughout the week. By the Lord's grace, these are days of flourishing at Apostles.

It's important to see this growth in perspective of the past two years, and to understand that in light of these scriptural categories. In some ways we could see the church coming out of the global pandemic as a seedtime of sorts. When we came through the worst of the pandemic, the Lord led us into a time of vision and new beginnings. In the summer of 2021 we shared a new ministry vision, *Cultivating Wholeness in Christ*, sowing the seeds of new ministry initiatives into the ground of the parish. A few years on, we're not only at beginnings, but ministries to the arts, to our neighborhoods, in spiritual formation have stability and are gaining strength.

And yet, in this time of God's goodness and grace, a time of flourishing, we embrace the holy rhythm of sabbath and mission: 'in harvest (too) you shall rest.'

Productivity ≠ Identity

In every season, a holy rhythm of mission and sabbath is not just a practical need—this rhythm forms us more into the likeness of Christ, both in this life and for the life to come. Consider how the Lord meant to form Israel with this sabbath rhythm. Consider how foreign that rest would have been for newly freed slaves, whose very identity had been shaped by backbreaking, unceasing toil. Consider that their usefulness or worth had only been defined by what they produced for Pharaoh and his empire. And then imagine how strange, yet how sweet it must have sounded to their ears, 'Six days you shall work, but on the seventh day you shall rest.' That these were not empty platitudes, but commands spoken by the very God who dethroned all the Egyptian gods, drowning Pharaoh's army in the Red Sea; who had shown himself a Lover and a Deliverer of Israel, a people who had been crushed under ceaseless toil. *The sabbath command is not simply an act of compassion for those who have labored hard; the sabbath rhythm means to redeem Israel's entire identity as the Beloved of God—that they were made for another world.*

We need a holy rhythm of sabbath and mission because we are not saved by our productivity. Our productivity is not our identity. What prompted God to deliver to end Israel's slavery in Egypt? Their cries of suffering from unceasing toil reached his ears, and he was moved with compassion. They were not made for work alone; they were made for worship, and to find joy and rest in the presence of God. So God stretched out his mighty arm to bring them out of slavery into a land of rest, a Promised Land, where he would dwell in their midst as their God; where he would form them in the wise and gentle rhythms of work and rest, in season and out of season, year after year.

Spare Time vs Sabbath Time

What does it mean to embrace God's holy rest, though? Just as the writer of Hebrews proclaims, 'So, then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God,' we ought to meditate on what *holiness* really is. What is the sabbath *really*?

The Jewish theologian Abraham Heschel describes the sabbath as 'a palace in time.'¹In other words, the sabbath is not just *functional*, to rejuvenate tired bodies and minds to get back in the game on Monday. Yes, the sabbath provides a day for self-care, to rest body, mind, and soul—but it is more. Yes, the sabbath means a cessation of tiring work—but it is more. The sabbath is a mystery, an invitation to gaze on the beauty of the Lord. The sabbath is a *homecoming* to the One who loves me beyond what I can ask, think, or imagine. It is a day to *taste eternity*, to glimpse the world for which we were made, a day to enjoy God for who he is, not just for what he can do for us, but simply because He is marvelous, one God in Three Persons.

The Catholic theologian Joseph Pieper has helped me see that it's so easy to treat the sabbath as a silo of spare time rather than a holy day to feast upon the beauty of the Lord. Pieper says that essentially we look at our days as either being work days or spare time. Spare time is when you're not on the clock, 'a time for a break in order to recover, a time after work to restore one's strength for more work.'² In other words, spare time exists to make us more productive, not to bring us into mystery of God. The sabbath exists, not for respite alone, but to bring eternity into time.

Compare that perspective with the world Wendell Berry describes when he reflects on a changing and accelerating America in his marvelous novel *Jayber Crow*. Jayber no longer finds peace and stillness when fishing familiar waters. Instead,

On weekends, the river is disquieted from morning to night by people resting from their work. This resting involves traveling at great speed, first on the road and then on the river. The people are in an emergency to relax... They don't slow down for - or maybe even see - an old man in a rowboat raising his lines.³

The sabbath is not spare time, a time to play hard because we work hard. No, the sabbath is a holy day, a 'palace in time'—a day that invites contemplation, a time for *being*, a time to tell stories and remember, a time give thanks for people, places, and things for what they *are*, not simply for what they *do*. As Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote 'Each mortal thing does one thing and the same...Crying, 'What I do is me: for that I came.'⁴

I'm going to tell you a little secret about priests, strange bunch that we are. From time to time, priests need to experience life in Christ apart from preaching Christ. We must embrace the truth we preach to others: you are not defined by what you do. Something preceded the work you do and that is this—Christ made you beautifully and wonderfully in his image; You are his Beloved and it's time to rest in *that*. And the irony there is that I believe such a season will actually help me grow and become better as a priest.

¹ Abraham Heschel, *The Sabbath*

² Pieper, *Only the Lover Sings: Art and Contemplation*, 18.

³ *Wendell Berry, Jayber Crow*.

⁴ Gerard Manley Hopkins, 'As Kingfishers Catch Flight'

Oh, I'm not sharing something unique to priests, am I? It comes to artists, teachers, and doctors, I know; it can come suddenly to one forced to take an extended break from work, or when they retire. Who am I apart from what I do *now*? You are his Beloved and you were made for another world. That's why the Lord gave us the sabbath. Rest is not for the sake of work, but for the sake of worship, to glimpse another world that is your true home. And while we await the eternal rest of the Lord, he has given us this holy rhythm of mission and sabbath so that together we are more conformed to his image and likeness as his people.

Conclusion

I am so humbled and grateful to the Vestry and to you, the congregation whom the Vestry represents, by offering me this sabbath season. It's a bit of a contradiction, feeling enthusiastic about the present and future of life at Apostles and also feeling a tiredness within that needs to rest in the Lord. In the harvest time at Apostles, I need to gaze on the beauty of the Lord and glimpse eternity in time for myself.

God has provided such capable pastors, staff, and Vestry here that I go away with full confidence in their leadership to guide the Lord's work in this time of growth and flourishing.

Even though I feel the need for rest and this season away, please know that I will miss you and I'll be ready to see you again on Christ the King Sunday. And I pray that as I'm pursuing the Lord's rest that you will practice sabbath, too. So let's embrace that holy rhythm of mission and sabbath that we may both serve the Lord and rest in the Lord, in these days and in days to come, and all for the glory of the Lord who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.