

A Song for the Sabbath and the World to Come

Meta

Date: June 16, 2024; Pentecost 4B

Location: Apostles Anglican Church

Readings

Ezekiel 31:1–6, 10–14

Psalm 92

II Corinthians 5:1–10

Mark 4:26–34

Opening

When Friday and Saturday evening roll around, the music changes in our household from other weekdays. Not that we listen to music every day, but when we want good tunes playing, especially when we're cooking, Friday and Saturday music is different than weeknight music. And one of our household favorites for Friday and Saturday nights is jazz. At the end of the week, when you're slowing down, I commend to you Wes Montgomery's guitar jazz and John Coltrane's *Blue Train* album, especially in spring and summer months. Like basil was meant for tomatoes and cheese makes every dish better, jazz pairs well with any meal you'll be cooking.

Music appointed for specific days has ancient roots, too. The title for today's psalm, Psalm 92, reads 'A Song for the Sabbath.' I invite you to turn to page ### in your pew Bible as we meditate on Psalm 92 this morning. In your pew Bible, you'll find that in the Psalms there's an all caps heading which reads *A Psalm. A Song for the Sabbath*. It's important to note that these titles are part of sacred scripture. Other section headings in Scripture are additions by translation committees, but when we find 'A Psalm of David, A Psalm of the Sons of Korah' these are part of the original manuscripts.

Here's why that's important for today: not only has the psalmist given us a cue *how* to read this psalm, to recognize this psalm belongs especially to the Sabbath; *this is the only psalm in the entire Book of Psalms appointed for the Sabbath Day*. It is the sole psalm appointed for this day of the week—the seventh day, set apart as holy unto the Lord.

The Search Begins

Upon first reading of Psalm 92, I struggled to see how this psalm expresses the Sabbath. Moments of struggle like this are good—truly. When I cannot find the meaning straight away, it means I must seek further. I must read scripture again, more closely, slowing down. I have to listen and wait. This is difficult for Americans. The American way is to move on if a process requires us to slow down, wait,

and listen. If a restaurant has a waiting time longer than 30 minutes, we're moving on the next restaurant where we can be seated and have food on the table ASAP.

The church fathers had a different instinct with 'elusive' scriptures. They *leaned into* puzzling scriptures because they recognized an opportunity—an opportunity to deepen their dependence on the Holy Spirit more than their own reason.

As a song about the sabbath, the sabbath meaning of Psalm 92 eludes me. I don't hear clear echoes from the Sabbath commandment in Exodus. Rest isn't explicitly mentioned in this psalm. Enemies and evildoers have a central place in this psalm and I'm not sure how that squares with the sabbath.

So, Lord, give me faith seeking understanding, as St Anselm said. I desire to pray and praise on the Sabbath like Psalm 92 but the connection eludes me. I believe this psalm reveals something essential, something beautiful about the sabbath, but it remains hidden from me. I walk by faith through Psalm 92, not by sight. I must search and listen and wait.

So, as you can already surmise, I'm taking you on a sojourn of my search through Psalm 92 this week, praying you might benefit from my search.

What's the Essence of Sabbath?

When the meaning of scripture escapes you, it's not only a good thing to slow down, read again, listen and wait. It's good to ask questions—not only questions of scripture, but questions about one's self. After reading Psalm 92 the first time and meditating just a little while, I began asking myself the question, 'have I misunderstood the heart of the sabbath?'

We live in an era of the church when Christians have sought to recover the sabbath. Glory to God—the Church was well overdue in that effort. Twenty years ago when I was in seminary—that phrase alarms me—my friends and I talked often about how practicing sabbath had been lost. We discussed practicing sabbath ourselves during seminary and how we could emphasize sabbath practices when we began serving local churches.

My friends and I were a microcosm of a much wider, Spirit-led movement in the Church. In these past 20 odd years, we've benefited from numerous books published about embracing the sabbath, practicing the sabbath, how to practice sabbath in a technological world, etc.

In this revival of embracing sabbath—thanks be to God for it!—many have emphasized what I'd call the sabbath basics: ceasing, resting, and feasting. But when we seek to understand what the sabbath means in scripture, this is only part of the picture. What kind of Sabbath psalm leaves out any mention of ceasing and resting? Psalm 92.

There are deeper dimensions to the sabbath than ceasing, resting, and even feasting. *The Sabbath is a mystery*, a gift that is far greater than a 24 hour break from tiring labor.

Psalm 92 leads us into the mystery that is the sabbath. Though this psalm be silent about sabbath practices such as ceasing and resting, it discloses a greater mystery.

There is an ancient Jewish legend that goes like this:

*And Israel asked the Lord, 'what is that precious thing which You will give us if we obey your Word?' And the Lord said, 'The world to come.' And Israel said, 'Show us in **this** world an example of the world to come.' And the Lord said, 'The Sabbath is an example of the world to come.'*¹

More than any other craving we have, we crave the world to come. Here's what wearies us: the world is not is not what it ought to be; we are not as we ought to be.

We desire the world to come more than even our good cravings. We crave good friendships, harmony and joy in family life, meaningful work, glimpses of beauty in song and stories. Yet these are not our deepest cravings. Josef Pieper said, 'Every fulfillment this side of Heaven instantly reveals its inadequacy.'²We crave God's sabbath world because God put eternity into our hearts, to recall Ecclesiastes 3. So we pray the sabbath in the psalms because we crave the fullness of God that begins and will never end.

The Sabbath in Book IV

Psalm 92 is not only a sabbath psalm, it's a reorientation psalm; a handbook for prayer *after* one's world has ended. Last week I mentioned that the psalms have different sections, such as the Psalm of Ascents. But the psalms as a whole have five main divisions, five books. In Book III (Psalms 73-89), we find psalms and laments of Israel when their world is falling apart. When your world is falling apart, Psalms 73-89 are a handbook for prayer.³

But today's psalm belongs to Book IV comprises Psalms 90-106, and these are psalms of Israel praying into the future after the worst has happened. The dominant theme in these psalms—and Psalm 92—is the kingship of God over all nations. They focus on God's past faithfulness, they get back to their roots.

This is how one embraces the future after their world has collapsed—focus on the Most High God. Even if your world hasn't fallen entirely apart; if you've endured a week that's simply turned you upside down and you've experienced how unfair and unjust this life can be, this is how you begin again. Fix your eyes on the Most High God. The Most High God is the name the psalmist invokes in Psalm 92 and also Psalm 91.

No matter the ruler, the regime, the empire that flexes its muscle, he who sits in heaven laughs at the presumption of earthly power, for he sees that their day is coming, to quote Psalm 2 and 37. The Lord sees the day of their downfall. The Most High God is enthroned above the earth; his kingdom cannot be shaken and it will never fail. After one's world ends, we focus on the world to come, the world where God alone is King. That is the essence of the sabbath.

The World to Come: Worship and Joy

And what is the centerpiece of the world to come? Worship. There is no such thing as a sabbath *without* worship. Worship *is* sabbath. When you see God rightly, your soul wants to erupt in praise.

¹ *Legend recounted by Abraham Heschel in The Sabbath, 730*

² Josef Pieper, *Happiness and Contemplation*, 16-17.

³ The thematic categories of the books of the Psalms I attribute to Mangum, Douglas, ed. *Lexham Context Commentary: Old Testament*. Lexham Context Commentary. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2020.

That is why this psalm opens in praise, seeking to fill the hours of the day with adoration; declaring the love of the Lord in the morning and his faithfulness in the night hours.

Music belongs in worship and on the sabbath because this day is a day of joy. In Israel, they summoned the lute, the harp, and the lyre to praise the Lord. In Tennessee, we would hasten to add the banjo, the mandolin, and the dulcimer.

What is it that makes us glad? Getting to do what we want to do? No---look at verse 4 again. ‘You, O Lord, have made me glad by *your work; at the works of your hands I sing for joy.*’

The World to Come: Crooked Ways Made Straight

Having opened the day and this psalm in joyful adoration, the psalmist pivots to a meditation on the world to come.

Though the wicked sprout like grass and all evildoers flourish, they are doomed to destruction forever; but you, O Lord are on high forever. For behold, your enemies, O Lord, for behold, your enemies shall perish; all evildoers shall be scattered.

Sometimes we struggle with the theme of enemies in the Psalms. There is no escaping it; enemies are a pervasive theme. It’s too large a theme to address this morning, but note here that the psalmist speaks of *the Lord’s enemies*. The Lord has had and will have enemies until the return of our Lord Jesus Christ. St. Paul said to the Philippians that ‘many walk as enemies of the cross of Christ.’⁴

This is the riddle of evil in God’s world. We do not comprehend it. But the Psalms teach us again and again that, in the face of tremendous injustice and evil, we keep the commands of God and trust the Lord for vindication. ‘Fret not yourself because of evildoers, be not envious of wrongdoers!’ says Psalm 37.

The sabbath experience gives renewed vision, to gain a fresh glimpse that one day evil will be no more. Outside of the sanctuary of God, you cannot make sense of the world’s madness. It is only *inside* the sanctuary of God that you see the world rightly.

In Psalm 73, Asaph, the psalmist, is worn down by the flourishing of the wicked and he can’t make sense of it. Then he says, ‘But when I thought how to understand this, it seemed to me a wearisome task, *until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I discerned their end.*’⁵From all the troubles, burdens, and weariness of this broken world, Asaph only found rest by coming into the sanctuary of God—by gazing on the world to come.

Sabbath people live by faith, not by sight. We gather in worship to remember that this world is passing away. We gather to renew our faith that the Most High God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit will make all things right.

⁴ Philippians 3.18

⁵ Psalm 73.16-17

The World to Come: The Righteous Flourish

In the world to come, the righteous will flourish, for this is the will of God.

You have exalted my horn like that of the wild ox; you have poured over me fresh oil... The righteous flourish like the palm tree and grow like a cedar in Lebanon. They are planted in the house of the Lord; they flourish in the courts of our God.

Notice the contrast—it's like a biblical joke! The wicked are like grass, but the righteous are soaring trees!⁶ Notice *why* the righteous flourish—they are planted in the house of the Lord; they flourish in the courts of our God. What makes the righteous righteous, according to Psalm 92? They put their roots down in God's Temple. They listen to his word, they obey his commands. They do not seek their own strength to deliver in times of trouble, they come to the house of God and shelter under the shadow of the Lord's wings. They pray psalms of thanksgiving and praise in the courts of God—it begins their day and ends their day. That's what makes the righteous, righteous.

And the Lord desires not only to bless them, but to make them flourish. To grow and soar. These are the meek of the earth, the humble of God's kingdom. God exalts them because they do not exalt themselves. Even in their aging years, they bear fruit—they flourish! They are ever full of sap and green!

Closing: The Lord of the Sabbath

This is what we crave. To be anchored in the place of the Lord's presence. To experience the world to come. That's what gives us joy and rest.

Not only do we receive the gift of the sabbath, we have an even greater gift—we know the Lord of the Sabbath, Jesus Christ. We cannot read the Psalms apart from Christ. Only Jesus Christ completes the sabbath.

Because of Christ and his resurrection, the sabbath achieved its fullness on Sunday, the Day of Resurrection. Sunday, for us, is the example of the world to come. I cannot come close to describing this mystery as well as Olivier Clement does. He writes:

Sunday reveals God's design, conceived from the beginning of the world, 'to unite all things in Christ.' Sunday is Paradise regained and the inauguration of life in the resurrection, the miraculous suddenness of dawn, and the light without end of the eighth day, when God is finally all in all. Sunday draws together all the mystery of our salvation—it is the time created by Christ, recaptured by him and unfolding in him, in the Alpha and the Omega, the first, the last, the Living One.⁷

He is the Lord of the Sabbath and the King of the world to come! He will bring our craving, our longings in Psalm 92 and all the psalms to completion on the Last Day—the Day of his Return. And so this brings us to joy and praise.

⁶ John Mason Neale, Neale, J. M., and R. F. Littledale. *A Commentary on the Psalms from Primitive and Mediaeval Writers: Psalm 81 to Psalm 118*. Vol. 3. London; New York: Joseph Masters; Pott and Amery, 1871.

⁷ *Olivier Clement, Transfiguring Time, 94–95.*

As I closed last week, so today I conclude with a prayer from John Mason Neale for Psalm 92, this prayer a doxology:

*Glory be to the FATHER, the Most Highest; glory be to the SON, the LORD our Rock; glory be to the HOLY GHOST, the fresh Anointing of the LORD. As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be: world without end. Amen.*⁸

⁸ *J. M. Neale and R. F. Littledale, A Commentary on the Psalms from Primitive and Mediæval Writers: Psalm 81 to Psalm 118, vol. 3 (London; New York: Joseph Masters; Pott and Amery, 1871), 192.*