

Last week we started talking about Sabbath at St. Thomas', and it got me to wondering. What exactly does Sabbath mean? Well, in scripture, it's mostly sorta kinda clear. It starts with the Creation narrative in Genesis where God works for six days solid, takes a look around, and rests. God blesses the seventh day and sets it aside as holy for all time. Sabbath then gets codified in the Ten Commandments as not just a day of rest for the people of God, but as a day of rest for everyone, including foreigners and livestock. It's a day of rest, which is lovely, but it's not just rest. It's setting aside work to remember that this day is holy. And why is it holy? Because the seventh day is the day God stopped, looked around, and said, "it is good." So we do the same thing. We stop, we look around, and in the name of God, we say, "it is good." We look at the work we've done, and the work God has done, and appreciate the fruit of our labors, always pointing back to their source, the source, of course, being God.

For a while, God's people celebrate the Sabbath every seventh day, doing just as they're supposed to, more or less. They determine some consequences for those that don't take the Sabbath seriously, some of which are pretty intense, but there's good reason for it. A day set aside for God is the holiest day, and if we don't recognize the Sabbath, we're taking something set aside for God and making it about something else, maybe even making it about us.

Well, Sabbath expands in time, to include the sabbath year cycle, where the land itself gets a break. Every seventh year, the people stop farming and let their fields lay fallow. There's good science behind it. Though they may not be able to explain the idea of nutrient depletion, they know a field worked too hard for too long will stop producing. Even the land gets a breather! Every seven years!

And then, something really cool happens. They observe this weekly sabbath and seven-year sabbath and generosity begins to spread. And then they add a layer to the seven-year sabbath cycle: the people rest, the land rests, but the bottom line rests, too, and the people of God start to forgive debts every seven years. Any debt your neighbor owes you gets wiped clean!

And then *another* cool thing happens! They observe these seven-year sabbaths for a cycle of seven times, and in the 50th year, they declare a year of Jubilee, sort of the sabbathest of sabbaths. All the earlier stuff stays true, but they pile more on top of it. All debts, all of them, are wiped clean. If someone is enslaved, they're set free. If you own a piece of property, it goes back into the community for someone else to take over. No one gets charged rent, borrowed money has no interest, sins are forgiven, and the blessings of God and God's people flow freely. And you know what's especially cool? The year of Jubilee, the culmination of sabbaths every 50 years, the year of Jubilee begins with Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, the holiest day of the year set aside for repentance and forgiveness. In other words, before we start the slate-wiping year of Jubilee, we have to look at ourselves and recognize where we've fallen short. Before we can begin to forgive others, we have to seek forgiveness for ourselves. Before the next cycle begins, we seek forgiveness, we correct where we can, and we forgive those indebted to us (and that includes those that seek forgiveness from us).

Now, from that time, the Sabbath changes some, but not much. By the time this Jubilee cycle lands, what all these pieces are for has pretty well settled in. It's not until Christianity comes along, really, until we see another big change. The change there is which day we hold as the Sabbath. But at its core, it remains the same. It's still a day, a year, a "week of years" (as Leviticus has it) set aside for the people of God to remember God, seek forgiveness, and gather themselves to what is holy. So, that's what the Bible says the Sabbath is. And that's great. But I can guarantee you, most of us have some other ideas of what Sabbath might be.

Growing up, Sabbath was for the nicest shirt in my closet, the same silk shirt and khakis every week, at first way too big, then just right, then way too short at the wrists. Sabbath was for cut-up donuts and the older women in the church wearing bonnets. By the way, a bonnet wasn't a bonnet, technically. It was a hat, sometimes just a fascinator, but always, a "crown." Sabbath was for fried chicken and family meals. Big sabbaths like Easter were for pastels and eggs and shiny fake plastic grass. And little sabbaths were for robes and candles and trying to find cool patterns in the carpet behind the altar. In the church I grew up in, sabbaths were for loud and bad singing, joyful despite the quality. Sabbath was mostly for rest, except I usually still had chores to get done and homework I'd put off. At its best, sabbath was for lazing around, but I rarely got it at its best. I know my mom connected those days to God, but I mostly connected them to not having school that day while dreading school the next. When I worked in the corporate world, my views of sabbath were more or less the same, just grown-up versions. Sundays were my last day to get all the weekend in before going back to the grind. They were for sleeping in as much as I could get away with, and they were for brunch and hikes and dozing off in front of a favorite show. And these days, Sundays are my Mondays. It's a joy to do the work I do, but it's still work. Well-placed, I hope, but work nonetheless. I don't know about y'all, but I've lost sight of Sabbath in all my Sundays. I mean, I carve out a chunk of time that's definitely set aside for God, but it's not a whole day. And if I'm honest, it's probably half a day carved out for me, and if God's lucky, there'll be some time for the sacred leftover. That's upside-down, and the way I've been going about things, it's not sustainable for me or this church. Maybe y'all feel something similar?

You know, I worked at a church years ago that was the weirdest place. If I went to any individual's house, they were the nicest human beings on the entire planet. This was true of probably 95% of the congregation. But as soon as they set foot on church property, something changed, and everyone just got mean. Church had become a chore, and instead of being a place where people could rest and forgive wrongs, it became a place of tension and grudges bearing teeth. And that made Sabbath a hard duty rather than a gift of joy. Now, I know that my own perspective has layers of spiritual baggage piled on top of it, so, earlier this week, I sat with some of the staff and asked what sabbath means to them. I wish y'all had been there. It was such a cool way to spend a morning. We talked about God and rest and quiet. We talked about things that needed to get done whether it was God's day or not. And we talked about, as a staff maybe for the first time since I've been around, we talked about what our souls need.

I don't remember who came up with this image, but someone said that the idea of sabbath feels cozy, like a blanket or hot chocolate on a rainy day. And from there, a phrase came up. Sabbath is a warm place to worry. A warm place to worry. Something about that line unlocked a flow of ideas. I can see the bumper sticker now: St. Thomas': A Warm Place to Worry. What must we all be carrying for that to be what we need the most right now? A warm place to worry, where the world can hang on for a minute while we sit tight with God. We'll get there, but first we need to warm ourselves by this fire. Oh, y'all, what an incredible image: a warm place to worry. In Paul's letter, we're told not to grow weary in doing what is right. Easier said than done, I'm afraid. And if the place we set aside for God is like that one church, I don't know that it's possible. How could we persist in doing what's right if homebase is toxic, cold, and dangerous? But with a true sabbath at the core, we've got a chance. We'll need to remember what sabbath is for. It's God, yes, but it's also rest. It's also forgiveness. It's also freedom. And it's also seeking out comfort in Christ. To start it, though, to get that clean slate, we'll need to work on that atonement stuff. Where have we stepped wrongly? Where have you stepped wrongly? Where have I stepped wrongly? And how do we make it right? If you have spoken cruelly, seek forgiveness from the one on the receiving end. If you have held a grudge, seek out that person and try to make it right. Be generous with each other, be warm with each other, and hold each other's worries or fears or hurts with all the grace God holds yours.

Last week, when I introduced this idea of a sabbath year here, I said I didn't know what it would look like. That was a true fact. But it's starting to take shape. Maybe it's still a little blurry, but I'm getting a sense. It's gonna be holy. It's gonna be sacred. And given everything the world is doing and we're doing and I'm doing and you're doing, I hope we can slow down and come to this warm place to worry. And like those first sabbaths, when we get here we'll stop, we'll look around, and in the name of God, we'll say, "it is good."