

Called to the Sabbath

[Exodus 20:8-11](#)

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[Real Audio \(3 MB\)](#)

The thesis behind this year's series of sermons on calling is that before God has called you to do anything, he has first called you to himself. Nowhere is that better illustrated than in the call to observe the Sabbath.

Perhaps the greatest metaphor for the life of faith is in the biblical story of the Exodus, when God freed a people from slavery. They passed through the Red Sea like we pass through the waters of baptism and began the journey to a promised land. But before any of us arrive, like the Hebrews, we have to spend a lot of time in the wilderness learning how to live by faith. That's because our faith is what keeps us free, and we cannot enter the Promised Land if we are still slaves to the hurts, sins, and identities of our past.

Early in the journey God brought the Hebrews to Mt. Sinai where they received the ten commandments. These commandments had the purpose of helping the people keep their new freedom. Thus, the commandments are not just about obedience. More importantly, they are about deliverance and salvation. We may even think of them as ten signposts that guide our journey through the desert and keep us from getting lost.

Today's text is the fourth signpost to freedom: "Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy." The word for sabbath in Hebrew means literally to stop. Cease. Cut it out. Every sabbath we hear the call to stop working, stop being so productive. Stop worrying about your future. Stop trying to be a creator. And stop collecting things. Manna can only be collected for six days; we have to stop collecting on the sabbath day.

We tend to think of the day as beginning in the morning. By contrast the ancient Hebrews began their day with sundown. Thus, their sabbath observances always began the night before the seventh day. Remember, at night when we cease our work, God continues his. In the words of Eugene Peterson, "We wake into a world we did not create, to participate in a salvation we did not earn." The Sabbath was given to us to help us lift our eyes, weekly, and remember we are the creation of God. Your life is lived within his creative hands. So you can stop being so anxious.

I have been enjoying Meg Greenfield's posthumous book, *Washington*. The thesis of this woman who spent her professional life observing our city is that the town reminds her, mostly, of high school: "High school is the preeminently nervous place... these are the years in which young people first encounter a make-or-break, peer enforced social code that calculates worth as popularity and popularity as the capacity to please and be associated with the right people (no matter how undeserving they may be), as well as to impress and be admired by the vast, undifferentiated rest... Some version of these imperatives exist in other group settings as well, from kindergarten to the nursing home. But nowhere are they so intensely and continuously and unforgivingly present as in high school and Washington, D.C."

Whether you agree with Ms. Greenfield's analysis or not, we all have to concede that this is a city that can make you nervous. We have learned constantly to ask ourselves, "Have I done enough?" "Have I tried hard enough?" "Have I networked, impressed, or earned enough?" We might as well be asking ourselves, "Am I one of the cool kids?" In the midst of all this anxiety, the Sabbath says, "You have to cut it out." For there is no greater way to lose your freedom than to make anxiety your lord.

Perhaps the primary thing we are called to stop on the Sabbath is our little argument with life. At least every seven days, give it a rest. About five years ago a woman in our church lost her husband who died of a massive heart attack while attending a committee meeting here. Shortly after his funeral, she saw a young couple having an argument one Sunday, here in the church, not far from the place where her husband died. Every fiber in her body wanted to interrupt them and say, "Stop it. Just stop. Don't you see what you

have? Don't waste it on an argument." We all have some argument with life: the job that isn't quite good enough, the extra money you can't seem to get, the children you can't make perfect. On the sabbath we hear God interrupt, "Cut it out. Lift up your eyes and see what incredible blessings you have before they are gone."

Jesus honored the sabbath. He used it to pray, worship, and teach about its true meaning. It was never meant to be a burdensome set of blue laws, he claimed. "Humanity was not created for the sabbath, but the sabbath for humanity." He often got in trouble with the religious elite because he kept insisting that the sabbath was always meant to free us. And Jesus used the day to perform some of his finest miracles, freeing the sick with the gift of healing.

So it is not surprising that in the spirit of freedom, the Early Church changed their day of worship from the seventh day to the first day of the week to observe sabbath on the day of resurrection, the day Jesus freed us from death. Week after week, year after year, we join the followers of Christ around the world: Black, White, Asian, and Hispanic followers. We join followers who meet in Gothic churches, followers in storefront churches, and persecuted followers who huddle in house churches, all with the common affirmation: "We are free! We will not be afraid. We will lift our eyes to heaven and behold our resurrection hope. And we will rest in our faith that God is good."

Notice the rationale that is included in the commandment to observe the sabbath: "For 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." God himself stopped and rested from his creation on the sabbath, not because he was tired, but in order to enjoy all that he had created and called good. Thus creation culminates not in work, and certainly not in the creation of humanity. No, creation culminates in doxology and praise.

This means that sabbath worship is your opportunity to see the creativity of God in all the ordinary days that lie between sabbaths. Sunday is not your day off from frantically working for your employer so you can frantically try to get things done at home. The purpose is to rest, as God did. This is not rest just in recreation or in lying around the house. True re-creation occurs only in resting your soul in the worship and praise of your creator.

We sometimes say, "On Sunday we go to church." But this isn't quite right. You are the church -- all week long wherever you have been sent to serve God. On the sabbath we join the community of faith in coming to worship and Sunday school, not just to learn but to find rest for our weary souls.

In Ethics, Aristotle claimed the only purpose of rest is to regain strength for activity. Thus rest is a means to an end, and the end is greater work. But from its Hebrew roots, the Bible has always claimed just the opposite. It is work that is a means to an end, and the end is sabbath rest. The sabbath exists not for the weekdays: the weekdays exist for the sabbath. Sunday is not our interlude; it is the climax of our week.

Our society has been more influenced by Aristotle and Greek culture than by Hebrew culture. We only think of rest as a means of catching our breath so we can get back in there and keep improving on a life that is not quite good enough. But nothing is more enslaving or heretical than saying "not good enough" to what God has created and already called "good." There is no better way to get lost in the desert than to start saying "not good enough." You'll never make it to the promised land, but will remain enslaved in a wilderness of discontent. In the face of such contemporary discontent, the church longs for the sabbath opportunity to join God in looking at all he has created and say, "It is good."

From the beginning, we have been created to live in the rhythm of working six days, and resting on the seventh. Work and worship. Labor and liturgy. All creation from humanity to the animals and even the dirt of our fields has been created with the need to rest, not just to recover strength, but to recover the goodness of creation. If you resist this created rhythm of your life, before the soul weariness returns and lose your vision of God's good work in your life.

This is why our sabbath observances always have a note of celebration in them. Because God is good, and in worship we sing, pray, and proclaim our thanksgiving. In 1964, Jean Vanier established a community

for mentally and emotionally handicapped people called l'Arche, which means "The Ark." It's where author Henri Nouwen served until his untimely death. Vanier soon discovered that those with developmental disabilities, robbed of all pretense, reveal the essence of true humanity. Thus his community has insights for us all. One of the most important things they do in l'Arche is celebrate. Every chance they get. Birthdays, accomplishments, anniversaries, anything they can think of. If a week goes by without a celebratory event, they just make one up. Why? Because as Nouwen says, "Suffering is a part of life, and you can never wait until the suffering is over to celebrate."

In celebration we choose to enjoy the goodness of God in the life we have. If you can see that, you are already in the promised land.

On this sabbath day, we join all creation in lifting our eyes to behold your goodness, O Savior. Your blessings are not only good enough, they are so good, more than we know how to receive. Amen.