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1 Samuel 3: 1 – 10 (11 – 20)
2 Corinthians 4: 5 – 12

Ps. 139: 1 – 5, 12 – 17
Mark 2:23 – 3: 6

*Breathe
rest in Rest,
holy Leisure –
airtight Time:*

Sabbath.

*hearing Ears,
Creation slowing –
open Eyes:*

Sabbath.

*guiltless Feasting,
sacred rhythms –
Heaven Hugging:*

Sabbath.

*Nothing-doing
Nowhere-going –
Work unknowing:
Sabbath.*

In his poem, *A Sabbath Poem*, writer John David Walt captures the essence of what Sabbath is really all about. Sabbath as a time of doing nothing, going nowhere, not working; a time of simply breathing and feasting and resting. Sabbath, not as a rule to be kept, but as a freedom to be entered into. Sabbath as a time to transition from human doings to human beings. Sabbath as a time when we become *more* ourselves, not less.

Sabbath, of course, is the issue facing Jesus in today's Gospel. First Jesus gets in trouble with the Pharisees for allowing his disciples to pluck heads of grain as they walk through the fields on a Sabbath. Then he gets in trouble with them again for healing a man with a weakened and emaciated hand on the Sabbath. Jesus reminds the Pharisees that God created the Sabbath for humanity rather than humanity for the Sabbath. Which is another way of saying that keeping the Sabbath is not about keeping sacrosanct rules. Then Jesus lets the Pharisees know that they are entirely missing the point of Sabbath, which *is* to heal and renew. They are living into the letter of the law and have completely lost sight of the intent behind it. How could that have happened?

The idea of Sabbath goes all the way back to the Creation story in Genesis. "Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude. And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. So, God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it (made holy, set aside), because on it God rested from all the work that he

had done in creation.” [Gen. 2: 1 – 3] God, the Creator and Inventor and Artist of all that is, rests. For six amazingly glorious days, God creates, and then God does something really important: God stops. God at rest shows us that God exercises restraint. Restraint is refraining from doing things that one has the power to do. In his book, *24/6*, Dr. Matthew Sleeth writes that up to this point in Creation, “everything has been created out of nothing, but on the morning of the seventh day, God makes *nothing* out of *something*. Rest is brought into being.”

The idea of Sabbath-keeping doesn’t come up again in Scripture until Exodus 16, the story of Moses and The Ten Commandments. Hundreds of years pass between the end of Genesis and the beginning of Exodus, and in that time, God’s people have become slaves in Egypt. There is no break for them and if they complain, then Pharaoh just increases their workload. But God rescues the people of God and brings them at long last to the base of Mt. Sinai. Moses goes up to meet with God and comes back down with the Big Ten.

Now, the first three commandments have to do with our relationship with God. The last six commandments have to do with our relationships with one another. The fourth commandment is the pivot point, swinging both toward our relationship with God and toward our relationships with each other. The fourth commandment is also the longest:

“Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, you or your son, or your daughter, your male servant or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore, the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.”

This is a very inclusive commandment. “This commandment embraces the wealthy, the slave, and the illegal immigrant. It pertains to minimum-wage workers and to students. It covers animals. It includes children. The Fourth Commandment,” Dr. Sleeth writes, “applies equally to men and women. It is made to protect those who believe and those who do not. It is to be followed by humanity, and it is observed by God.”

The Ten Commandments are not a curse, Sleeth notes, but rather a way of defining the people of God, a way of saying what is of God and what is not. Within the boundaries established by the commandments is freedom under the law. But, because people have a proclivity for circumventing the good intentions of the law, more laws get added. What begins as ten commandments expands to 613 laws by the time of Jesus. Sabbath is intended to protect people and to set the stage for a celebration of God, Sleeth writes. If our day of rest becomes about following a set of rules, then the celebration and joy are easily lost.

For many of us, perhaps, ‘sabbath’ seems like such a churchy, antiquated concept. After all, we now live in a world that prides itself – and drives itself – on a 24/7/365 regimen. It hasn’t always been that way, in fact it is a relatively recent occurrence. Many of us can remember growing up with Blue Laws, which meant that gas stations, pharmacies, stores and most other businesses were closed on Sundays. Sundays were quiet, peaceful and reserved for church going, Sunday dinner with family, Sunday drives and visiting with friends. People planned ahead, knowing that they would not be able to shop that day. The day was given over to relaxing and re-creation.

In the last two or three decades, all that has changed, to our detriment. Technology, globalization and secularization have all contributed. Sleeth writes that “Expectations of students, sports, and consumerism elevated to the level of religious fervor have only made matters worse.” He adds that the number of households with two working parents, or single head-of-households working multiple jobs have created a demand for expanded hours for shopping and services. The church, he says, has one foot on the dock of tradition and Scripture, and the other one in the untethered boat of culture.

The question for the faithful then is whether or not the meaning of our lives is about more than simply working, being productive, and acquiring more? Is it more about virtual connections through the internet and social media, or is it about taking a technology sabbath and being present to nature, to family and friends, to life itself? Work should not define who we are. And we should not fool ourselves into believing that either being retired or being a student means that we are not working. We live in one of the most affluent times in human history, and yet many of us never get beyond just trying to survive. We choose the never-ending cycle of consumption and waste. We never take the time to ask questions about the things that matter most. Taking a break from the rat race once a week enables us to think about who we are, why we exist, and why we are made. But, if we wish to have a day of rest, we will have to do it ourselves because it is no longer a societal default. And it won't be easy. Sabbath-keeping these days is not only an act of faith, it's an act of courage.

In today's Gospel, and in so many other instances, Jesus keeps bringing his listeners – us – back to the heart of the law. Sabbath rest is to help people, not hinder them, to be a refuge, not a prison. It's especially for those on the margins of society, but in truth, it is for us all. What do we need rest from? From being hurt, from our labor (even if it isn't physical), from the break-neck speed of this world, and from information overload. Rest gives our souls, as well as our bodies, time to heal, to revive and to rebuild.

Dr. Sleeth's wife, Nancy, used to teach English. On the first day of class, she would ask students to write an essay. She wanted to assess their writing skills and get to know them better. One year, Clinton wrote an essay three pages long. It did not contain a single comma, semicolon, period or paragraph indentation. It was one long, run-on sentence. Don't be like Clinton, Sleeth says. God did not intend for our lives to be one long, run-on sentence. Musicians will tell you that it is not the notes but the rests and the spaces *between* the notes that give meaning to music. To give meaning to our lives, God has given us the punctuation mark of Sabbath.

And finally, Sleeth writes rather poetically:

- “Rest is stopping one's work, whatever that work may be.
- Rest is freedom from harassment.
- It is the quiet after the storm.
- It is children fresh out of a bath with pruned fingers and the smell of baby shampoo, tucked under their blankets before bedtime.
- Rest is the sound of the night breeze rattling the palms as it comes in off the Gulf.
- Rest is putting your head down on the pillow knowing that you can sleep in.
- Rest is the beast of burden unhitched from the plow.
- Rest is walking around the edge of shorn cornfields in the fall.
- Rest is reading and setting the book aside when your eyes get too heavy.
- Rest is the sound of the wind through the screen porch of the beach house.

- Rest is stopping.
- It is staring up through the thin Colorado night sky at the spine of our galaxy.
- Rest is thinking about all the things that you could do on a Sunday afternoon and hearing a still, small voice tell you to just stop – and then taking a God-ordained nap.”

What does Sabbath look like (sound, taste, feel, smell) for you? Sabbath rest – not a rule to be kept, but a freedom to be entered into. How will you keep your Sabbath? Shabat Shalom. +