

April 22, 2018

TEXT: Exodus 23:10–13

TITLE: Global Sabbath Rest

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

Preaching on the Ten Commandments is seldom a crowd-pleaser. If there was a suggestion box for pastors about desired sermon topics, I doubt anyone would submit a request for sermons about not worshiping idols or coveting thy neighbor's donkey. Crowd-pleasing sermons are more about aspirations than admonitions—more about “Wouldn't it be great if we all loved one another and lived in peace?” than a finger-wagging message about how you should do this and stop doing that. We know that the Ten Commandments are important and that they are supposed to be taken seriously. I mean, they came from God no less! But mentally we tell ourselves, “Yes, they came from God thousands of years ago. But what's God done lately?” Despite all that, today we are going to look at the Fourth Commandment, which is worth our attention—and on this Earth Day, it is a real crowd-pleaser. Trust me.

The Ten Commandments appear twice in the Old Testament—once in Exodus 20 and again in Deuteronomy 5, just in case you weren't paying attention the first time. The fourth commandment says this: *Remember the Sabbath day and 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; you shall not do any work—you, your son or daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock or the alien resident in your towns. For in 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.* Pretty straightforward: work six days, rest one day. What I don't want to do, though, is to start parsing what counts as “work” and what counts as “rest.” What if you have to work on Sundays, but you have another day off during the week—does that count? What if you only read your work e-mails on Sunday but don't answer them—is that good enough? Frankly, if you have to ask those questions, you are already going in the wrong direction. So let's come at the Fourth Commandment from a different angle.

A young woman named Abigail Deutsch wrote an essay last year about sleeping on the subways in New York City. She talked about being in high school and spending long days getting to school, going to class, staying afterwards for clubs and homework and then catching the #6 subway home at night. She remembers with joy mastering the art of subway napping—slipping out of consciousness as the train left each station; slowly re-entering the waking world as the train arrived at the next stop. When she would mention this to friends, they would nod politely and immediately tell her to stop doing it. “Don't you get nervous? Isn't that unsafe?” they'd preach at her.¹ But Abigail saw it just the opposite way. To sleep surrounded by strangers on a train is to show faith in them. We usually sleep in the company of those we trust most: lovers, family members, friends. As she put

it: To nap among fellow riders is to presume there is something of the lover, family member or friend in them.

Every time we close our eyes, we rest in a world we didn't make, that we don't control, that extends far beyond our experiences of it, and which is truly able to sustain us and provide for our needs. While we sleep, the world goes on without our help. Sabbath rest builds on that truth, reminding us that everything is not on our shoulders. There is beauty and abundance all around us—land, sea, sky—shaped by God, sustained by God, and we are a part of that. To close our eyes, to let ourselves nap and rest means we trust the world and the God of this world with our very being. That's a powerful act of healing grace.

If napping on the subway feels a little subversive, then honoring the Sabbath is very subversive. In a culture that is always on, always available, always putting demands on us for our attention, our work, our productivity—to honor the Sabbath is radically counter-cultural. I don't have my work e-mails sent to my Smartphone; I typically only read them while in my church office. I'm sorry if that delays my responses to some of you, but that is a part of my Sabbath discipline. Must we truly be available 24-7? Are we so important and our work so critical that we can never take a real day off? The Israelites worked for 400 years for the Egyptians without ever taking a day off. Do you know what we called them? Slaves. God wanted something better than that for them, and wants something better than that for us.

Earlier I read the version of the Fourth Commandment found in Exodus 20. It spoke about keeping the Sabbath holy because God worked for six days and then rested on the seventh, thereby consecrating it as a blessed time of rest. Just three chapters later this same topic comes up again. But this time the emphasis is slightly different and the message shifts from individual Sabbaths to global Sabbaths. Listen to God's word: [Exodus 23:10–13]

For six years you shall sow your land and gather in its yield; but the seventh year you shall let it rest and lie fallow, so that the poor of your people may eat; and what they leave the wild animals may eat. You shall do the same with your vineyard, and with your olive orchard. Six days you shall do your work, but on the seventh day you shall rest, so that your ox and your donkey may have relief, and your slave and the immigrant may be refreshed. Be attentive to all that I have said to you. Do not invoke the names of other gods; do not let them be heard on your lips.

Exodus 23 tells us to keep a Sabbath rest, not so much because to do so is to imitate the way God rested after creating the heavens and the earth, but because by doing so we become people of justice. Through our keeping the Sabbath we care for the poor, the animals, both domestic and wild, and the land itself, giving them all a necessary time of relief.

In one way, keeping the Fourth Commandment can be read as promoting a self-help principle: “If you want to take care of yourself, you need to get your rest.” How often do doctors literally have to prescribe rest for us because our busyness, our burning the candle at both ends and Energizer-bunny mentalities are making us sick? I can tell you to take intentional Sabbath rests because it is good for you physically. I can also give you the same admonition from a philosophical and spiritual perspective because I know that most of the things you need to be fully alive will never come to you in busyness; they will only grow within you in quiet and rest. All of us need a Sabbath—a time to let go and let God—to free up enough space from our over-full lives to let something from God take root and blossom within us.

But scripture doesn't stop there. The bible isn't just a self-help manual. Exodus 20 is focused primarily on us: *Remember the Sabbath day and 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; you shall not do any work.* But Exodus 23 goes beyond self-help to justice—God's justice: *Every seventh year let your land rest. Let the poor in your midst eat for free. Let the slave and immigrant be valued at last. Let the work animals and wild animals have their time of rest. Don't invoke the names of other gods—gods of nationalism, gods of capitalism, gods of wealth and productivity and possessiveness. Don't let their names be heard on your lips. Remember God's Sabbath and keep it holy.*

Jesus once said, “The Sabbath was made for people, not people for the Sabbath” (Mk 2:27). In the end, this commandment is not about legalism. It's not about forced obedience demanded of us by a tax accountant God. It's about a gift to us from a loving Creator. And not just for us, but for all life—all beings—the land, water, air and all that depend on those things. It's not your one day a week Sabbath discipline; it's a global Sabbath commandment.

On Earth Day, we remember that this world is our life-partner—a literal companion upon whom we depend and with whom we exist. We quiet ourselves and think of animals, plants and nature's wonders. Hopefully we do so with prayers of gratitude on our lips, with prayers of contrition on our hearts for our wasteful, destructive ways, and with a quiet spirit that truly imagines what it would mean to let the land lie fallow for a year and give everything around us a chance to enjoy Sabbath too. A year without adding to the floating islands of plastic pollution in our seas. A year without burning fossil fuels to add destructive blankets into the skies above. A year without putting chemicals into landfills, a year without cutting down forests for our highways and strip mines, a year where immigrants get a chance to care for their families without fear, and in which more schools and hospitals are built than cemeteries dug to hold victims of war and famine.

Sabbath is a gift of God to us, to all of us, and to all of life. Keeping the Sabbath is spiritual self-help and biblical justice. If you don't know how to keep this

commandment, go for a walk on Earth Day. Take a silent stroll and really see the world around you. Believe in a global Sabbath and keep it holy for the sake of the God of all creation. That's the good word for today.

¹ Abigail Deutsch, "Subway Napping," *New York Times Magazine*, Feb. 26, 2017, pp. 18-19.