

Deuteronomy 5:12-15 ~ Mark 6:6b-13, 30-32

Sabbatical Time: Catching Our Breath

2nd Sunday of Easter ~ Sacrament of Holy Baptism ~ April 16, 2023

The Rev. Dr. Laurie Brubaker Davis

Introduction to Text

Jesus was an observant Jew. He knew the Torah and he followed it. The heart of the Torah was at the core of his spirituality, his teaching, and his ministry on earth. Including the fourth commandment to “Remember the sabbath day and keep it holy,” which David read from Deuteronomy in our first scripture lesson. Keeping sabbath, in one way or another, is not a suggestion, but a commandment. It was on the third new moon after the Israelites had been delivered out of Egypt, on that very day, they came into the wilderness of Sinai, that Moses went up to the Mountain, and God delivered what we now call the Ten Words or Ten Commandments. And it was on the morning of the third day that God spoke them to Moses.

Yup, you heard me talk about “the third day” last Sunday on Easter, of course, when God raised Jesus from the dead. And today we hear it again, way back in the book of Exodus, chapter 20: “Third Day Divine Timing, code for something holy, something, life-giving taking place. Divine transformation from death to life. How? By following these ten commandments, Jesus’ style.

But today we are considering only one. The fourth one. The one about sabbath keeping. Integral to the rhythm of life in harmony with God: Doing one’s work, and then stopping to refresh body, mind, and spirit. To regroup, restore, to *catch their breath*. True then: 1250 years before Christ. And true now, almost 4,000 years later, in 2023. Let’s see Jesus observing this rhythm as I read from our earliest Gospel written, Mark, chapter 6. Listen now for the word of God within these words of scripture, as I begin at verse 6b.

Sermon

Did you know that today is universally known by church folks as, “Low Sunday”? Yup: The first Sunday after the highest of high Sundays, Easter. The Day of Days when we celebrate that Christ is Risen, Hallelujah! Easter brings out our friends who belong to the “C & E Reunion Club” or alternatively known as “Creasters.” (Fun fact I learned in a recent new member class.) We love seeing them when they appear on Christmas and Easter, it is a thrill. And of course Easter is a great day to come: there will likely be great music, beautiful flowers, an upbeat message. Of course, my husband teases me that I think *every* Sunday is special and exciting for one reason or another.

But today, is Low Sunday. Not only do the numbers in the pews diminish, but pastors also often take the Sunday off. As an Associate Pastor for ten years, I was often tasked to preach on this day, and actually named it “National Associate Pastor Preaching Day.” But here I am today. And here you are stalwart dedicated church goers on “Low Sunday.” Good news: You are still getting great music 😊. The Handbells are back! Hallelujah! There are still Easter flowers here still for the taking. And we even got a little spoken reprise of our Children’s Choir Easter Introit before Lincoln’s baptism!

"Low Sunday" is a great opportunity to preach a more challenging message, since you are here for something beyond the flair and excitement of Easter. This year, I *am* taking this "Low Sunday" to do something a little different. I am dedicating this Sunday to preaching on the "why" and the "what" of my upcoming three-month sabbatical. The word "sabbatical" comes from the same word as "sabbath. The Hebrew root is the word for "stop." It's that simple and that complicated. What is the blessing in stopping? Especially now in our 24/7 culture, it's definitely a counterculture move. Who do you know who practices a weekly sabbath is one form or another?

If you think about it, God's commandment to "catch our breath" as individuals and as a church, is a challenge. Finding our own rhythm of work and rest, especially in our culture, takes creativity and discipline. We all swim in the ocean where "busyness" means being happy, important, purpose driven. Let's be honest, how often do we answer the question: "How are you doing?" By saying, "I'm busy!" Yet our scriptures, from creation to Moses to Jesus show and teach us a different way. A better way. A still, more excellent way.

Can we trust God with our lives, our relationships, our livelihood? Even for an hour, much less a day? Resting, going away to a quiet place to catch our breath, signals that we do. Doing this we are saying, "Yes, God, I trust you to handle things." It's a move that reminds each of us: it's not all about me. Here in our church, Beloved Community, it is definitely not "my church." In the same way I say every communion Sunday, "this is not our Table" – this is not *my* church. Together we are the body of Christ, we call FPC. My stepping away for three months helps you and me to remember, to observe, to live into that truth.

"Six days you shall work, but on the seventh day you shall rest; even in plowing time and in harvest time you shall rest." (Deuteronomy 34:21). God was telling them: Trust the land, trust creation, enough to rest: human life must conform to the rhythms of creation. When we humans are in sync with that, we can rest and be free from anxiety. In Deuteronomy 5 Moses took the ancient covenant at Sinai and gave it a new generation twist. He added a new and different motivation for the fourth commandment from God resting on the seventh day of creation, to "Remember the Exodus! Remember you were once slaves whom God freed!" A marvelous example of how The Bible reinterprets itself, changing and adapting.

Yet the core message is the same all the way through to our new generation here today. From baby Lincoln Marie to all the great grandparents in the room: Keeping sabbath is how we can practice being less driven, less coerced, less frantic, freer *to be* rather than *to do*. Human beings, rather than "human doings." This is not a modern day or post-modern phenomenon. Since the beginning, we homo sapiens are called to get back in rhythm with all creation and all people, no matter our station or status in life. As Walter Brueggemann puts it in his book titled, *Sabbath as Resistance*, "Sabbath is not simply the pause that refreshes. It is the pause that transforms."ⁱ I would say, the pause that reminds us about the gift of being human.

So too, a sabbatical! Not three days, but three months. We have ahead of us this summer a chance for us to collectively catch our breath. To experience a pause that transforms all of us. As Ruling Elder Sue Buck, current Moderator of our Winnebago Presbytery, said, "The sabbatical brings emotional, intellectual and spiritual renewal, a time to gain new perspectives and return with new insights and energy. The congregation benefits from a renewed pastor who brings insights to the mission and a spark to the work." David Colby, our Winnebago General Presbyter put it this way, "Sabbaticals provide breathing space, a chance for batteries to recharge and for creativity and inspiration to be refilled. We know this helps both pastor and congregation to stay fresh and able to focus on the gains made over the years and to think about future goals." This summer is our chance to do this!

It's been a long time coming for me: 31 years ago I was ordained as a Minister of the Word and Sacrament in the Presbyterian Church to Memorial Presbyterian Church, in Xenia, Ohio in 1992. At that time our daughter Emily was 5 and Hannah was 1. Now our two daughters are moms of our granddaughters. The oldest one is 5 and the youngest is 1. Where did those 31 years go? During that time I have served four Presbyterian churches (all in Ohio) before being called to be your pastor, here in Marshfield, Wisconsin. My call here began on November 1, 2017 to FPC. The presence of a 3-month sabbatical after five years in my annual contract, known in church talk as "Terms of Call" (and for every full-time installed Pastor in the Winnebago Presbytery) impressed me deeply. It was one (of *many*) signs that God was calling me to a healthy, dynamic, sustaining presbytery and church.

And November of 2017 was long before any of us had any inkling that just ahead of us in those first five years together, we would be zapped with the COVID-19 pandemic. An awful challenge, that was difficult for all of us in different ways. Worst of all for those who lost loved ones and who lost their livelihoods or worked on the frontlines in health care and services, while many of us were able to work more safely from home. It was especially difficult for the young people, particularly our teens and young adults. As your pastor, preaching to a camera, rather than to your beautiful faces was necessary, but exhausting. (Definitely not what I was called to do or what gives me joy.) Talk about "Low Sunday" – this was a sub-low 3 months of Sundays! Plus being your pastor as together we had to figure out so many things. Most of all: how to keep being church, while the building had to be shut down for a year and a half. This pivoting sometimes from week to week, sapped my energy and joy. Yet together, thanks to the energy and faith of you all: we made it through. Thanks be to God and to you!

This is my first chance in thirty-one years to take a sabbatical. This is brand new for me and for you. We will learn together. I have watched other colleagues take them and seen how both my pastor friends *and* their congregations have been renewed by this chance to catch their breath. The time apart opens up new avenues of exploration and learning. Yes, for both you, the congregation and for me, your pastor. A sabbatical is not simply a three-month vacation for the pastor. In my time away, I have a sabbatical project that involves study and travel, listening and writing. Free from the demands of weekly preaching, pastoring, teaching, and administering our church. And instead, free to let my curiosity and "scholar's heart" follow the wind of the Holy Spirit.

I only realized on my way to this sermon, that my sabbatical project taps into the core of my curiosity and wonder that began when I was an undergraduate at the College of Wooster--over forty years ago! Remember back when "Don't Go Breaking My Heart" by Elton John and Kiki Dee was the "Song of the Summer"? I was grooving back then for the first time to the writings of Thomas Merton and Henri Nouwen who opened my eyes and heart to the idea of contemplative prayer (where listening is privileged over speaking) as a key to the work of social justice, to work to which Christ calls us. I began to see for the first time how across different faiths and cultures, the core spiritualities share the love of God, neighbor, self, and creation. This core of inclusive, creational, incarnational Divine Love can bind us together, rather than divide and polarize.

As I wrote in our First Press Magazine, I pray it will help to incubate wisdom and "fearless discipleship" for me, for us, as FPC Marshfield, and for our Winnebago Presbytery. Our church and our presbytery are situated on land that was the home of three First Nation peoples: the Ojibwe, Menominee, and Ho-Chunk. I believe at this point that Marshfield is on ceded territory of the Ho-Chunk. (Winnebago = Ho-Chunk). As Presbyterians, you might say our native lands were on the green moors of Scotland and in the shadow of the alps in Geneva, Switzerland. I plan to spend time in Scotland, Switzerland, and even more time camping here in Wisconsin (all with my husband, Bob). I look forward to studying and connecting to the land, the people, and the core spiritualities I am convinced we share and will lead us forward as we seek to be the hands and feet of Christ here in Marshfield.

A map is only one story. I look forward to exploring the other stories of these lands, the other maps that we have disregarded. As J. Philip Newell (another spiritual mentor of mine) has written, "We cannot undo the tragic wrongs done in the name of our Christians, but we can be a part of a new beginning. We can callow the essence of our Christian heritage to be born anew."ⁱⁱⁱ For us here, I hope to lead a group of folks in a deliberate, respectful process toward a Land Acknowledgement later this Fall, Spirit willing. If you wonder what I'm talking about: come to the Forum.

You may be asking, "What about us?" When is she going to talk about what's going to be happening back here at the ranch. Our Sabbatical Work Group has lined up an exciting series of preachers. In addition to our familiar favorites, you will have the opportunity to hear from new voices drawing from Madison, Appleton, Minneapolis, and Oklahoma! Three of them will also teach a Forum following their service. You can look forward to sermons from: your former Pastor Mary Pol, David Lautenschlager (yes, Bruce and Nadene's son), Kerri Parker (Wisconsin Council of Churches), David Colby (Winnebago Presbytery General Presbyter), Rosangela Berbert, Executive Director of the Samaritan Counseling Center, and Kristina Kaiser (new member and certified pastor). And one in July Sunday you will hear our Youth reporting on their mission trip.

For now, I will end with a poem that spoke to my heart during the Pandemic when our building was shut down. Back when every Sunday was lower than Low Sunday. And I was preaching to a camera. This poem boosted and realigned my spirit. It's titled, "When I Am

Among the Trees” by Mary Oliver. Trees breathe. Just like humans. But while we inhale oxygen and exhale carbon dioxide, trees do the opposite. Photosynthesis: our Creator’s genius at work, day, and night. Every breath we take. Calling us back to the center of whom God created us to be.

*When I am among the trees,
especially the willows and the honey locust,
equally the beech, the oaks, and the pines,
they give off such hints of gladness.
I would almost say they save me, and daily.*

*I am so distant from the hope of myself,
in which I have goodness, and discernment,
and never hurry through the world
but walk slowly, and bow often.*

*Around me the trees stir in their leaves
and call out, “Stay awhile.”
The light flows from their branches.*

*And they call again, “It’s simple,” they say,
“and you too have come
into the world to do this, to go easy, to be filled
with light, and to shine.”ⁱⁱⁱ*

ⁱ Walter Brueggemann, *Sabbath as Resistance: Saying NO to the Culture of Now*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), p.45.

ⁱⁱ J. Philip Newell, *The Rebirthing of God: Christianity’s Struggle for New Beginnings*, (Woodstock, VT: Christian Journeys, 2015), pp. 48-49.

ⁱⁱⁱ “When I Am Among the Trees,” Mary Oliver, *Thirst: Poems by Mary Oliver*, (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2006), p.4.