

“Experiencing God through Sabbath: Stopping”

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Hebrews 3:12-19

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I'm grateful to Dr. Becky Davis who you'll remember was with us last week and kicked off our new Lenten series focusing on Sabbath, this setting apart of time for rest and renewal in the Lord, most commonly in the form of one day each week.

I know that many of you were able to make it to the keynotes last Sunday and Monday evenings as well, and over the course of those three instances she shared the what, the why, and the how of honoring the Sabbath, in effect taking all of our material for the next six weeks.

I'm grateful as well to Pastor Mark for putting this series together, as we get to benefit from his insights from his own sabbatical last summer.

Each week we'll be looking at one aspect of Sabbath, in the first few weeks through a particular section of the Book of Hebrews, the first part of which we read today. And today, we think about perhaps the most basic and maybe right out of the gates, the most challenging part about Sabbath: stopping. Let's go to God's Word together.

See to it, brothers and sisters, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called “Today,” so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness. We have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original conviction firmly to the very end. As has just been said: “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion.”

Who were they who heard and rebelled? Were they not all those Moses led out of Egypt? And with whom was he angry for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies perished in the wilderness? And to whom did God swear that they would never enter his rest if not to those who disobeyed? So we see that they were not able to enter, because of their unbelief.

Hebrews 3:12-19

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me?

Holy and Living God, we come to you humbled by this word to us, for as this word testifies to the rebelliousness of your covenant people long ago, we find ourselves just as guilty, prone to

wander, prone to turn away. Guide us this day, and by your Spirit open your Word to us that we might hear the hope in the rest that your promise. And for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

Be honest. When you heard phrases like “an evil, unbelieving heart,” “the deceitfulness of sin,” or “do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion,” anyone scratch your head thinking, “What does this have to do with Sabbath?” And understandably. It doesn’t talk directly about Sabbath, at least not yet.

But what is here is a bit of a gut punch: it’s the description of a people who turned from who they were and saw the aimless fruit of that labor, rather than stop, turn back, and know the Lord’s rest.

In the backdrop of all of this is the story of Exodus. Some of you may already know that story. The people of Israel were enslaved, in captivity in Egypt, under the rule of pharaoh. But then God sends the prophet Moses to deliver his people. Ten plagues and the parted Red Sea water later, Israel was free.

Moses leads them to a place in the wilderness called Mount Sinai, where God establishes his covenant with his people. That’s a really big deal. God’s saying, “You are my people, and I am your God.” He does this by carving into two stone tablets ten sayings, commonly known as the Ten Commandments, one of which we read a little while ago, the fourth one in fact: “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 your 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.”

You know, I’ve felt like calling them the “Ten Commandments” is a bit of a misnomer. I mean, yeah, when you hear them, “Remember the Sabbath,” “You shall not murder,” “You shall not make for yourself an idol,” they sure sound like commands, but it kind of sells them short just to think of them as a list of rules.

And yeah, they’re occasionally referred to as the ten “sayings” or ten “words” or ten “commandments,” but much more often they’re referred to as something else: the “covenant,” that is, God’s covenant with this people. I am the Lord who brought you out of the land of Egypt. That’s who I am, and because of who I am and what I’ve done, here’s who you are now. It means that we might understand these ten commandments less as rules to follow and more as signs that these people belong to God.

For example, instead of thinking of the commandment, “You shall not murder,” simply as a rule—not such a bad rule—it’s like God is saying, “Because of who I am and what I’ve done, and because of who I’ve delivered you to be, one sign that you are my people is that you don’t kill in cold blood.”

It’s kind of like a conversation we have at home often enough. Usually it’s when the boys are bickering about this or that, or one of them has taken something from the other, or they get to shouting at each other, and Frances or I might say, “We don’t do that,” the message—at least the one we’re trying to get across, to mixed effect—is that that’s not who we are as a family, who just take from each other or treat others unkindly. That’s not who we are. Now we’ll definitely get into these are the rules, don’t break them mode sometimes, but when we share it in terms of “We don’t do that,” it’s less about the rule and more about identity.

That’s something like what the ten commandments are. A covenant, a statement by God of who he is, what he’s done, and who he’s delivered his people to be.

I offer all that background on Exodus and the Ten Commandments and the people of Israel because it’s important as we approach this thing called Sabbath that we understand the tone with which this commandment is given. Do we hear it as a rule: “Don’t do stuff on the Sabbath, because that’s the rule”? Or do we hear it more as, “One of the signs by which we are called to be the people of God is that we rest from our labor. This is who we are. This is who God has called and claimed us to be.”

It sounds like a pretty great thing, right? “I am the Lord your God, and *you* will take a break!” It’s a bit more than that, but not such a bad gig.

I love the way Dr. Davis put it last week at one of the workshops: “Sabbath isn’t about doing nothing. It’s about engaging God on a deeper level.” That is to say, because we are stopping all the other regular rhythms, things that can just turn into noise, we rest, we clear out the mechanism, why? Just to kick out feet up and binge-watch true crime shows? No, not quite that. Something even better. To enjoy the blessing of knowing the Almighty in a deeper way. That’s what we’re invited into.

“I am the Lord your God. Take a break, and come be with me.” I mean, sweet deal. Chiseled right into the agreement, this is who we are, who God has delivered us to be, a people that rests in him.

So why is it so hard to do?

Well, that’s where this passage in Hebrews speaks so much truth to us. V. 16 says, “Now who were they who heard and yet were rebellious? Was it not all those who left Egypt under the leadership of Moses? But with whom was he angry forty years? Was it not those who sinned,

whose bodies fell in the wilderness? And to whom did he swear that they would not enter his rest, if not to those who were disobedient?" This is getting to another part of the Exodus story: a sequence of events that directly led to the people wandering in the wilderness for forty years.

See, after Sinai Israel comes to the edge of the Promised Land, the land God had promised to bring them into. So they send spies into it, and those spies come back with disturbing reports. "The people are huge," they'd say, "and there are so many of them! We don't stand a chance." And the people listened, and lost hope. Didn't matter all the amazing things they had seen God do, or the covenant he had literally etched in stone with them. They felt they had to take care of it all on their own, and they didn't like the odds, so they said they'd rather die in the desert. So God gave them up to what they wanted, and they wandered the desert for forty years.

That's what Hebrews is talking about: a people who had forgotten who they are, and whose they are, who they had been delivered to be. They thought that the path set before them all depended on whether they by themselves could do it, rather than stopping to reflect on the power of the God who had brought them this far. They didn't stop.

Any of that starting to sound familiar? Trying to do it all yourself, wandering aimlessly, thinking like it all depends on you, that if we let up even for a second, it all comes crumbling down. Any of that striking a nerve?

The other day I spoke with Amelia Daniels, and she shared how their family was doing, and I asked if I might share what she said. One thing she said was a frustration for them, for herself, was, as she put it, "letting the calendar run us instead of us running the calendar." Any of that sound familiar to anybody else?

It can feel good to be busy, to be productive, to be valued, but it can go too far. It can turn into feeling like our life is a matter of maximum productivity, of becoming indispensable, of becoming masters of our own fates, and even that can feel good, and we can be seduced by it, "hardened by the deceitfulness of sin" as Hebrews puts it. But lo and behold what happens when we discover that we can never produce or generate enough, and that we are surely not masters of our own fates? We can get locked in, wandering aimlessly, until it all comes crumbling down.

Or, there's this call, this invitation, to remember who we are, to remember whose we are, to remember who we've been delivered to be, and *rest*.

It's hard work to rest. That feels like an oxymoron, but it's true. It's hard work to rest. This is why "stopping" is so crucial when we consider this invitation into sabbath. It's less about it being a bunch of rules not to do regular things, but more about identity. We are a people who will work and serve faithfully, but our labor will not consume us. We will rest, because it is woven into the very fabric of creation—on the seventh day God rested—because we have not been

delivered into a life seeking righteousness or favor or success merely by earning our way, producing our way to try to be enough. We have been freed from that kind of captivity, freed into a life by grace, in which we are met by the cross of Christ that says, “All you could do or could have done is redeemed, not by your effort, but by mine, so rest in the grace of God.”

Last week, our Session met, and something we did—we do this every year—was take time to discuss what we sense as spiritual burdens that we face as a church. Your elders have their ears to the ground, so we talk about, “What are the sources of pain that folks within our church and within our community face every day? How might the gospel of Christ meet that pain?”

One of our elders John Luttrell offered this, and I asked his permission to share it here. He said, “I think so many in our community feel a constant pressure to get ahead or maybe just to keep up.” Do you think that’s true? I do. I think we’re swimming in it. We feel this pull to do more, to work more, for our kids to do more. We think about how we might maximize our time and productivity. Why? Well to keep up with them over there. And again, time management can be good. Efficiency can be good. Striving for excellence can be good. But when they become the objects of our pursuit, they consume us.

And the antidote is simple: stop. Stop. Just for a day. Stop and recognize that the world does not rest on your shoulders. Stop and rest in the one who has called you into a better way, a way defined not by what you do, but by what he has done.

If any of this is landing for you, I invite you to take a step on a journey today. Lent as a season is a journey to the cross, so it’s as if the cross of Christ is always in our sights, and that cross says, “It doesn’t depend on you. It is finished.” And as a step on that journey, remember the sabbath. We don’t want to get legalistic about this, but if you’re looking just for a practical step to take, honor the Sabbath. A time set apart when we say to everything else, “That can wait, because this rest is part of who God has delivered me to be.”

If that time is a full day, maybe even a Sunday, great. If right now, you’re thinking, “Are you kidding? There’s this and that, and what about the kids?” then start small and let it grow. Dedicate time in one evening or one morning a week to stopping everything else and simply pray, or read Scripture, or take a nap and then pray. Engage with God in a deeper way, and then tell me you don’t want more of it, tell me that rest doesn’t change the way you look at every other hour in the week. Yes, everything you stopped doing will still be there when you’re done, things you’ll tend to in due time, but guess what, the world didn’t stop turning while you were resting in the Lord.

And it never will.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.