

SEQUOYAH HILLS
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Experiencing God through Sabbath: Embracing”

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Our hope throughout this Lenten series on Sabbath is not just that we gain perhaps a deeper understanding of Sabbath but that this season might lead us to adopt this particular discipline for regularly. As we’ve shared, Sabbath is perhaps especially appropriate for a season like Lent because embedded in the commitment to rest in the Lord—not just rest, but rest *in the Lord*—embedded in that commitment is our admission that God is God and we are not and that the world does not rest on our shoulders. It is an act of trust, of faith, of obedience.

So as we continue in this series, drawing upon Pastor Mark’s insights from his sabbatical last summer, we look at an aspect of Sabbath each week. Two weeks, maybe the basic premise of stopping, then last week the notion of discovery, the unexpected in Sabbath. And this week, with the hope that this good news of rest in the Lord may become a bit more engrained in our spiritual lives is this thought of embracing Sabbath. Let’s go to God’s Word together. I’ll be reading from Hebrews, chapter 4, verses 4 through 11.

For we who have believed are entering that rest, just as God has said, “As in my anger I swore, ‘They shall not enter my rest,’” though his works were finished since the foundation of the world. For somewhere it speaks about the seventh day as follows, “And God rested on the seventh day from all his works.” And again in this place it says, “They shall not enter my rest.” Since therefore it remains open for some to enter it and those who formerly received the good news failed to enter because of disobedience, again he sets a certain day—“today”—saying through David much later, in the words already quoted, “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.”

For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not speak later about another day. So then, a Sabbath rest still remains for the people of God, for those who enter God’s rest also rest from their labors as God did from his. Let us therefore make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one may fall through such disobedience as theirs.

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

God our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, we praise you for you are indeed living and active around us, within us, and, we pray, through us. We thank you for the blessing of this Word, testifying that in your creation of the world you saw fit to bestow upon us a sign of rest, a sign that we are not merely meant for productivity or efficiency, but also for life, and that abundantly. We pray for your presence and continued providence among us today. And for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

One of the classic theological or philosophical quandaries out there, a thought experiment more than anything else, really, is something called the “omnipotence paradox,” or how God can be all-powerful in all things. So if God is omnipotent, there is nothing God cannot do.

Maybe you've heard it put another way. If you grew up in the Sunday School world, you may recognize this song, "My God is so big, so strong and so mighty, there's nothing my God cannot do...for you!" That's another way of saying "omnipotent."

The "omnipotence paradox," however, is a tricky little thought experiment that in a way seeks to put the omnipotence of God at odds with itself. Here's a classic structure of it. Could God, in all of his power and creative might, make a stone so big that he himself, in all of his infinite strength, could not move it? Could God make a stone so big that he couldn't himself move it?

See how that's a tricky one? If yes, if God *could* make a stone so big he couldn't move it, then that would seem to limit God's infinite strength, that there is a limit to what God could actually move. And if there's a limit to what God could actually move, then there's something God can't do, therefore he's not omnipotent. On the other hand, if no, if God *couldn't* make a stone so big he couldn't move it, then that would seem to limit God's creative scale, that there's some limit to how great or how grand God could create something to be. And if there's a limit to how great God could create something to be, then again there's something God can't do. Therefore, he's not omnipotent. Either way you go, so it seems, there's a limit on what God can do.

A classic question for theologians and philosophers to ponder—I think the most common answer is that there's a logical fallacy embedded in the question, therefore it doesn't count. But it does raise maybe a more subtle question that can gnaw at the edges of faith sometimes: can God really handle it? Can he handle it all? I mean, yeah, the knee jerk answer that you feel you have to give in church is, "Of course he can," but for anyone, maybe in moments of doubt and skepticism, have you ever thought to yourself, "Does God really have a handle on all this? Or are there things that maybe stretch God or challenge God more than others? If some things are bigger challenges or bigger problems, maybe God dedicates more time and attention to them rather than what's going on in my little world?" Have you ever had a thought like that? "There's so much horribly wrong across the world and throughout history. Why would God trouble himself with what I'm dealing with here in Knoxville, TN?"

It might not be so obvious, but a thought like that has some connection to what we're talking about with the practice of Sabbath and to this passage in Hebrews 4.

For the first few weeks of this series we've been going through this small section of the Book of Hebrews that focuses on the rest of the Lord, and if you've been with us, you'll remember that the way it talks about rest thus far has been the people of Israel after being delivered from Egypt coming into (or *not* coming into) the Lord's rest, that is, into the Promised Land. Thus far, that's what "rest" has meant within this section of Scripture.

But now, Hebrews is going to throw in a couple of other shades of meaning to how we might understand the Lord's rest. In fact there's three of them. One is the rest into which Israel was called into, into the Promised Land, as in v. 3, citing a psalm, "As in my anger I swore, they shall not enter my rest," referring to the Israelites' unfaithfulness and being given up to wander in the wilderness.

But then, Hebrews adds in another layer, in v. 4. "For in one place it speaks about the seventh day as follows, 'And God rested on the seventh day from all his works,'" invoking the story of creation in which God created the heavens and the earth on days one through six, but then on the seventh day, rested, and that rest became the basis for the commandment for the Sabbath day to the Israelites.

But then, there's another. Later in v. 8: "For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not speak later about another day. So then, a sabbath rest still remains for the people of God; for those who enter God's

rest also cease from their labors as God did from his.” And this one’s a bit different. It’s not quite Promised Land rest, something Joshua would’ve been involved in. But then it doesn’t seem to be exactly the one day a week sabbath rest either, but rather “another day,” that is, that day to come. This seems to be nodding toward a spiritual rest, maybe an eternal rest.

Point is, all these layers are now getting added on to how Hebrews is presenting “the Lord’s rest,” all of it hinging on the fact that on the seventh day, God himself rested, “rested from all his works.”

And that’s where that pickle of a question, that omnipotence paradox, can God make a stone so big he couldn’t move it, and even the more subtle questions like “There are so many more serious problems in the world; how could God pay much attention to mine?”, that’s where those questions start to intersect with this passage and our practice of Sabbath, because they raise the thought, a thought some of you might’ve had since we’ve been talking about all this: if God’s so powerful, so infinitely powerful, why did he need to rest in the first place?

Is there a scale of activity or creation that even for God would be tiring? Your run of the mill sustaining of creation and intervention and miracles, your pushing back the Red Sea, your raising Jesus from the dead, all those things, they’re a walk in the park, nothing too strenuous, all in a day’s work. But creating everything from scratch in its totality, well, even God’s gotten take a breather from all that. I’m being a bit facetious, but you might’ve had that question: why would God need to rest?

It’s a fair question, because when you start thinking about, it could be pretty concerning. If there’s a certain threshold of holy activity beyond which God is going to get tired out, then what happens if or when we ever cross it? Are there days that are just so strenuous, an earthquake over here, heretics over there, war brewing over there, and then a few football games going on—and we all know God cares about those—are there days just so strenuous that like a tired parent at the end of a series of toddler tantrums, not that I’m speaking from personal experience or anything, God just can’t be bothered anymore because he’s taking a break? At that point, are we on our own? Not very encouraging, if that’s true. Definitely not good news for us.

But what if this promise of rest, this declaration of the rest of God, had less to do with God’s being a bit tuckered out, and more to do with modeling something about who he is and who we could be as a result?

Scripture testifies again and again of the steadfastness of the Lord, how the steadfast love of the Lord endures forever, as the psalms tells us, how the Lord is “the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom,” as Isaiah tells us. Christ himself tells us in John 5, “My Father is always at his work to this very day.” It doesn’t seem to be saying that God is losing steam.

So what do we make of this resting God? What I would offer to you is this: first, that God rested so that right from the beginning, he demonstrates, he models that this new creation would not be about mere productivity or efficiency; creation wouldn’t be about what we generate within it; and second, and this is how God resting becomes quite good news for us, that God got back to work, that he didn’t just put everything together and then has been kicking his feet up this whole time, that his rest ended, so that we might share in it.

As we’ve noted a few times along the way in this series, underneath some aspects of our resistance to rest is perhaps this hidden pride, maybe even idolatry, that it all depends upon us. Well when God rested, for a day, and then got back to it, it testifies that we can rest knowing that God has not abandoned us or grown tired of us or become indifferent to the trials we face. It means that we can live depending not on

ourselves to produce everything, to answer every question, to address every contingency. Why? Because we don't care? No. Because the Lord does not grow tired or weary.

What might a life like that look like?

Just over a week ago in the paper, Catherine Porth, a director at the Knoxville Entrepreneur Center, published a column detailing the adoption of rest among female entrepreneurs in our community. And she shared how unique that was especially within the business world and especially among entrepreneurs, for whom the language of pushing and grinding is just part of lexicon, but as she put it, "the feeling of having to be resilient and push oneself was causing many to get burned out on something they were once so passionate about building." But then among those she hears from who have embraced rest as part of their entrepreneurship, they share how resting made them a "better business owner, better parent, better spouse, and better friend."

Now that's just a glimpse from not an entirely Christian or even broadly spiritual perspective, but even there, the fruit of rest being embraced was clear: that no matter how easy it is to be led to believe that it all depends on us, stepping away into a rhythm of rest very quickly can make us realize just how non-urgent so much of that urgent to-do list actually is.

It's kind of like this. You're riding a rollercoaster at Dollywood, or down at Six Flags, or wherever. Your turn comes up, and you go to your spot on the rollercoaster. In the newer ones, the harnesses come down and click into place, and you click the seat belt into it and you hear the gears latch into place, and they have you in there good and tight. Then the rollercoaster goes up, up, up, and then at that big plunge, that first big drop, what do most of us do? Cling on to the harnesses for dear life, right? Now, if those harnesses and those gears and those seat belts gave way somehow in the middle of the ride, what are the chances we'd be able to hold ourselves in there just by ourselves? Pretty slim, right. Our holding on isn't doing a darn thing to keep us in that rollercoaster. But if we embrace that hey, the harness has got us, and it's locked in, what do we then get to do. Arms out, enjoy the ride.

After that day of rest upon creating the heavens and the earth, God didn't just kick his feet up and stop working. He's locked in, and he won't let us go. And he invites us into a life that doesn't try to hold on and control something that really we have very little control or ability over. He invites us into a life that can embrace work in the Lord and rest in the Lord.

And when we talk about embracing the Lord's rest, when we finally let go of our own need for control and our illusions of control, we find that our God is so big, so strong and so mighty, there's nothing our God cannot do...for you.

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