

# SEQUOYAH HILLS

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

## “Experiencing God through the Sabbath: Celebrating”

Rev. Mark Lampley

**Psalms 138:1-3 and Luke 6:1-11**

March 19, 2023

At Sequoyah Church, we have been preaching a series on “Experiencing God through the Sabbath.” Pastor Jay and I, along with our Winter Speaker Becky Davis, have talked on: What Sabbath means, Where it came from in the Bible and its Jewish roots, How we observe this 4<sup>th</sup> commandment, and some of its relevance in our lives today. We’re discussing stopping work: to discover God, to embrace this gift, to bow down toward God to give thanks, and to praise God for strengthening our soul!

“To honor the Sabbath and keep it holy” is like a seven-layer cake, amazing to see but much, much better to experience firsthand! The deeper you get into it, the better! We’re hearing our church family discuss it more and people want to apply it in meaningful ways. The Holy Spirit is involved in unpacking it, so it’s dynamic, not static, rigid, or an outdated spiritual practice.

It takes discipline to *rest* the way God planned. It’s meant to be a gift, not a burden. It’s more about vulnerably opening up to get closer to God than it is about getting caught up in do’s-and-don’ts. God doesn’t want us to do it only out of obligation, rather God wants us to willingly give our hearts so we can be joyfully renewed! Because God rested first, we are invited- indeed commanded- to follow suit.

The Sabbath is less about **what** to do or **what** to avoid doing and more about **who**- WHO we are focusing on when we rest from our labor. God is the ONE who gives Sabbath its meaning and gave the day in the first place. The difference maker in keeping the Sabbath is cluing in to the Lord Jesus. As you may know, Jesus’ teaching and healing were not well received by everyone, but it changed lives. I believe He can change our lives! Because our benevolent God knows us so well, he gives us all good gifts, including the Sabbath to remake us, so that God can continue a good work in us. When God restores us, we can’t help but praise Him. Thanksgiving is a natural response to God’s unearned grace!

We now turn to Luke 6:1-11 which reads:

*“One **Sabbath** Jesus was going through the grainfields, and his disciples began to pick some heads of grain, rub them in their hands and eat the kernels. Some of the Pharisees asked, “Why are you doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?” Jesus answered them, “Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? He entered the house of God, and*

*taking the consecrated bread, he ate what is lawful only for priests to eat. And he also gave some to his companions.” Then Jesus said to them, “The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.”*

*“On another **Sabbath** he entered the synagogue and taught, and there was a man there whose right hand was withered. The scribes and the Pharisees were watching him to see whether he would cure on the Sabbath, so that they might find grounds to bring an accusation against him. But Jesus knew what they were thinking, and he said to the man who had the withered hand, “Come and stand in the middle.” He got up and stood there. Then Jesus said to them, “I ask you, is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to destroy it?” After looking around at all of them, he said to him, “Stretch out your hand.” He did so, and his hand was restored. But they were filled with fury and began discussing with one another what they might do to Jesus.”*

Prayer: Bless, O Lord, the reading, hearing, and applying of your Word. Amen.

These two stories at the beginning of Luke chapter 6 focus on observing the Sabbath. The fact that Luke includes them, one after the other, may indicate that the Sabbath frequently came up, as conversation, in the religious communities. People want to know: what it's about and how exactly to Sabbath. Resting, especially resting in God, was a struggle for Israel, and it can be for us, today. Let's look deeper at how Jesus handled questions about this Sabbath rest.

In both stories, Jesus claims people's needs are more important than the law. There are exceptions to some rules, and Jesus makes it clear, especially when it comes to showing compassion. He demonstrates He is Lord over all, the eschewed and the faithful, the sick and the healthy.

In the *first* story, Jesus declares He is the “Lord of the Sabbath.” This means He is superior to Sabbath laws and: when, where, and how they apply. For us, the Church of today, this means that Jesus, his words, and his actions determine the church's understanding of the Sabbath.

While Jesus knew his disciples were hungry for time to be with him, the Pharisees were hungry to stifle Jesus. To do him in! They claimed that Jesus and his disciples were wrong to: pick grain, rub their hands, and eat kernels as they went. While on a walk, the Jewish law allowed this, but not harvesting. Jesus knew this was nit-picking. He corrected their thinking because He properly understood the spirit of the law and He is superior even over the law.

God knows how to help balance our lives and when we don't listen to him, we can get misaligned. If we take the time to reflect on the character of God and his overarching faithfulness, then we can have a: fuller life, a better-prioritized life. This is how we can live into what God intends. On our journey of faith, we get to celebrate that He is Lord over all the issues we face. He understands when others have rejected us. When we are not accepted, God fully sympathizes and embraces us. He is the Gate, the Way, He is the Rock when all else is sinking sand! He's worthy of celebrating! Jesus is Lord over our hurts. God chooses to offer good things, even when we don't deserve it because of things we've done that we shouldn't have or things we've neglected to do

that we should have done. To quote one of our choir members, “Jesus saves us from the weeds we wallow in.” God is the Redeemer and knows how to make us new.

God helped do a *new thing* in me during last summer’s deep dive into Sabbath. When I was searching for Him during my loneliness and grief, after losing my stepfather, God proved to be Lord over my sadness. He remade me, in an unforgettable Sabbath morning over at Montreat. God put me in front of a pottery wheel for the first time—revealing some deeper theological understandings. With God, as the Potter, and we as the clay, we don’t have to be perfect, just need to be a vessel. I know it may sound crazy, but that experience felt holy. I lost myself in Sabbath enjoyment because of how God changed my thinking. Through dirt and water, God transformed my sadness into joy. I had so much rejuvenation, throwing on the pottery wheel/ making clay bowls, that even three bowls later, I was eager for more of what God was doing in me. I believe Sabbath can include this kind of delight, this sort of holy feeling, of losing ourselves in the moment.

Think about what you like doing, where God can speak to you, maybe through hiking or being outdoors, doing art or some creative expression, getting into music, journaling, or using our labyrinth. I challenge you to mull over what really renews you so that you can weave it into your Sabbath to see how God might do a new thing in you. For your Sabbath, set apart some parameters and as you seek God, you’ll find God. Does it help to formally begin your Sabbath time? That’s traditionally how the Jews start their Shabbat. They begin and end with lighting a candle, saying prayers, and eating. To start my Sabbath, it helps me simply to lay down my phone and put away other distractions typically vying for my attention during other days. What might you let go of to better focus on God and his ways? On Sabbath, invite the Holy Spirit: to move you and to praise him anew.

Because I’ve found so many good Sabbath resources, we’re continually uploading: Scripture, reflections, and prayers to our website under the Connect and Grow tab. Perhaps they can help you and your family.

In the *second* story of Luke 6, Jesus proves that God prefers mercy over mandates. Jesus is trying to get across that the Sabbath is more about “yes” than it is about “no.” He illustrates what a “yes” looks like by healing a man who had a withered hand. He invited the man into the middle of the synagogue because he wanted everyone to clearly see the healing. By healing, Jesus says “yes” to this person’s life. He gives life. So often in our Me-centered culture, we do the opposite. Our choices diminish others, and because of it people wither away. Jesus saves the person, ironically as the Pharisees plot to kill Jesus. Sometimes, when Jesus shows us a better way, unfortunately, we refuse to change our idea from “no” to “yes.”

My favorite graduate school professor put it this way, “It’s easy to shake our heads at these Pharisees. But, before we get too smug, we might want to ask ourselves whether we are showing symptoms of the same resistant spirit.”

The scene reveals the problem of interpreting what to do or not to do on the Sabbath. The question at the center of Jesus’ conflict is simple... to heal or not to heal on the Sabbath? Give life (do good), or kill (do evil)? Jesus, with words and actions, answers the question declaring there’s never the wrong day to help or heal. Neither is there a time when God is so hurried, He doesn’t see our pain. Love doesn’t rush. Love is patient. Love is kind. Love doesn’t quit at the first sign of trouble, or run away from the uncomfortable or difficult. Love sits with us even in challenging moments. Do we sometimes slip into thinking that there are times more convenient to love others? Do we conclude that we’ll show mercy or kindness only when it’s on OUR schedule? Often, we all fall short of being patient, kind, and loving 24/7/365. God doesn’t, though!

The Sabbath is a time to let our “yes” be about God re-shaping our hearts into what God desires of our day-to-day. Adopting a regular Sabbath practice opens us to God changing us to more clearly see the needs of others. It may be through caring for those we’ve never thought about, or helping someone who is in pain. It’s often in serving another, that God makes us into a new creation. Our Lord’s message is strong: there’s never a wrong **time** to show mercy/ to minister to human needs.

When we’re living into the Sabbath the way God intended, we’re less likely to be preoccupied with our own agenda, like the Pharisees. They didn’t see or care for the broken man in their midst.

In our hearts, let’s say “yes” to the Great Physician who knows both what we need and what others need. Like the one with the withered hand, stick out your hand today and trust God will help you see his agenda. Open yourself to others metaphorically or literally reaching their hand out.

Sabbath guru, Abraham Heschel says, “surrender your desires before God. And, say yes to the rest. We quench all of our thirsts with Sabbath tranquility.” In this way, we learn what fully satisfies. We remember what really lasts. We embrace that the “eternal God is our refuge and strength. Underneath us are His everlasting arms.”

When we slow down to ponder this, we can realize, we’re saying “yes” to letting ourselves be a human- BEING, rather than a human- DOING.

In observing the Sabbath, we discover there are a lot of reasons to praise the Lord, who is worthy of celebrating!

I wonder what newfound joy you could find if you gave Sabbath a fresh start in your life?