

Sabbath

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Deuteronomy 5

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Happy Thanksgiving to you fellow Pilgrims on the Christian Way.

How much we have to be thankful for!

Our first list of thanksgivings comes easily enough. We are thankful for a place to sleep that is warm, food, pets, people we love who love us, and certainly our faith family. In this type of thanksgiving, we join children at their bedside grateful for God who is our provider, for God who loves us. It is a comfortable chore and easily leads us to sleep.

When we are an adult, when we become Pilgrims on the Way, we are called to add into our lives a different type of thanksgiving. We are invited to linger longer in gratitude that we might remember the stories of our lives. Remember when a dead end turned into a path forward, a light appeared in the darkness, a gift arrived. Thanksgiving of this sort takes more time, more commitment, and more intentionality. It is a prayerful remembering. For Christians, prayer is always done with God. So this type of thanksgiving is a time to remember with God. It is like inviting God to sit on the couch with you while you open up your memory book.

As we invite God to sit down with us, let us remember how it is we came to know God at all. You might recall from the last time I spoke, God's introduction to the people gathered at the base of Mount Sinai. "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery..." God is known, God is seen, when God frees us from our unjust, ungodly masters.

As you open your memory book, you often can see these ungodly masters in the pages. There, however, you will also see God's work in you, what you've left behind, what you have moved towards, and the freedom you are living into.

Turning to a page in my book...I'll not forget the day when I gave my candidacy sermon to this church. In the pews was a friend from my young adult days, one who I travelled with during a rocky patch in my life. She, who is now a minister in New Hampshire, just happened to be here that day, visiting family. As I sat, listening to the choir sing, I was flooded by the memories of that time. I felt God's joy in knowing what I had travelled through to be sitting in the preacher's seat of what I heard in prayer was an amazing church. I preached using the Kite Runner describing that moment when Amir, a middle aged man, had a chance to "be good again"

in caring for the child of the one he had hurt so long ago. God gave him a way to make it right. I felt the parallel in my gut. God freed me to make my life right.

This is my third year with you. The memory of those first months and year is sometimes lost amid my latest "to do" or "to worry about" lists. If I am not intentional and prayerful, if I don't take time to remember, I can forget you are the gift God has given me. You are the gift God has given me.

So enter in the Sabbath, that which commands us to carve out time for intentional, prayerful remembering with God.

Observing the Sabbath day, keeping it holy, is the commandment that takes up the most space of all of the 10 commandments. The 10 commandments are often held higher than all the rest of the law because they are short, can be counted using our fingers, and are that which God gives directly to the people rather than through Moses. Twice the commandments are given in our scripture. The first time is in Exodus 20 and the second in our scripture, Deuteronomy 5. In the description of the 5th commandment, the Sabbath law, they most differ. See if you can hear what is different.

From Exodus, the simpler of the two:

"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 male 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."

And then the scripture from Deuteronomy:

"Observe the Sabbath day and keep it holy, as the LORD your God commanded you. 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, or your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock, or the resident alien in your towns, so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you. Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day."

Deuteronomy certainly expands the list of those who

shall not do any work, makes it more descriptive, to make sure we get the point that all who serve, even the ox and donkey, are to be allowed a day of rest. Despite the layers of social inequality there is an underlying assumption that all are part of God's creation, all are deserving of joining God in the cycle of work and rest.

This, in itself, could lead to another sermon. But today I want to focus on the other difference, on the imagery of God.

In the Exodus text, God's work of Creation is summoned. In six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them. The picture is of a Creator giving to us all a gift. This imagery leads us to the type of thanksgiving we first spoke about, the kind we never outgrow. It is the "thank you God" before we fall asleep. While comforting, it alone is hardly the stuff of a Pilgrim adventurer.

In Deuteronomy, however, the imagery of God is of the one who has saved us, led us through a trial, led us from slavery to freedom. By now, that should be no surprise to you. The Sabbath is given to us so we have time to remember "you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm." Each generation translates this into their own experience. Pilgrims, remember when you first met your God. Remember when you first came to our church or first heard God in prayer. Remember the moment when you saw God as more than the creator of all that is beautiful but as one who willingly entered into your life...that you might be led forth on a journey with God.

The Sabbath, despite its bad rap, isn't about being quiet and doing nothing all day long, it is about entering into a type of intentional, prayerful thanksgiving that sets us free to explore, to go on an adventure, to risk something big for something good. For the Pilgrims long ago, it meant getting onto the Mayflower and travelling to an American shore no settler had yet settled upon believing that the God who saved the Israelites long ago would make a new way for them.

The Sabbath isn't just a household affair. It is at the center of the 10 commandments because it is what most gives to a people, a nation, an identity that allows them the freedom to be a people, a nation with God.

Freedom is not safety. On the contrary, many Pilgrims died in the journey across the ocean. The great irony of Deuteronomy is it is written about the time Israel, the pilgrims of the Old Testament, were to enter the promised land at the time they were about to lose the land. They would soon to be on a journey into Babylon. But by keeping the Sabbath, by taking the time to remember with God, both peoples were given the courage to throw their lot in with God wherever God led. When the Israelites were

given the opportunity to give up their God for the idols that surrounded them, they clung to the one who said, "I am your God." When the Pilgrims were given a chance to go back to Europe, they chose to remain in America.

The temple may fall, the way forward be unclear, but their faith--their remembering with God--gave them an identity, united them as a nation, and gave them courage to be.

It was no picnic to board the Mayflower. They had had two boats and one, because of foul play, kept springing leaks. So the Pilgrims boarded the Mayflower crowding in with a group of folk they didn't much like. In Chip's sermon from last year (one you may like to read again off our webpage), he writes "those 100 Separatists crossing on the Mayflower were crammed below decks where there was barely headroom to stand up for 66 days in a space no bigger than Mertz Hall."

The Separatists, the Pilgrims, set off for a land they didn't know, and in so doing escaped those who would flood their faith if they stayed.

Chip continues, "For weeks at a time they had no hot food, no fresh air; it was non-stop crying children and babies, ill-lit, foul smelling—a rolling, pitching, stinking inferno."

Diced food, noise, conflict, turmoil, things burning... wait a minute...I've had Thanksgivings like that! It can be hell to be caught up in the hundred things you need to finish to make the day "successful". Or being trapped with a bunch of people you don't really know or really like even if they are somehow related to you. Or being around those who have stopped time, remembering you as someone you no longer are. Or having your soul flooded by those who pontificate their non-religion, or their politics--acting as if everyone is supposed to agree. Or, as so many do, coming face to face with those who have hurt you. The Thanksgiving gathering becomes a mess of failed ambitions, hurt feelings, trampled faith, and the overly full tummies of those who have kept eating so they don't scream.

The Pilgrims responded in this way...again I quote from Chip. "To survive these hellish circumstances they gathered and sang together the Psalms of Thanksgiving; they prayed without ceasing even in their illness and despair."

Pilgrims keep the Sabbath.

The Sabbath is not equal to the holiday of Thanksgiving. Sabbath is meant to be enjoyed each and every Sunday, hymns of praise, prayer, and a time to reflect are all part of Sunday worship. Still we can intentionally make Sabbath a part of our Thanksgiving celebration.

Keeping Sabbath on Thanksgiving requires you do

something before you reach the home of the wild turkeys. Praise God using the Psalms, seeking out the thanksgivings. Or sing songs of gladness to God. And, take time to pray. With a notebook in hand, take time to invite God to sit with you. Remember how God was there in your home despite the conflict. Remember how God helped you learn to trust another, trust God, when you started out on your own. Remember how you have been given a chance “to be good again.” Remember, that whatever it is that feels so bad right now, it will not always be. God brought you out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm... and will do so again.

There is a story told by the gospel of Luke. One Sabbath, Jesus was teaching in the Synagogue when he spied a woman bent over, who had been crippled by a spirit for 18 years. Jesus saw her. He called her over, placed his hands on her, and made her well. Some in the synagogue became indignant saying “There are 6 days in which you can do work, 6 days in which you can heal. Work ought not to be done on the Sabbath day.” Jesus shot back, “you untie your donkeys on the Sabbath. Ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has bound for 18 long years, be set free from this bondage on Sabbath day?” And the crowd rejoiced.

Ought not you be set free on this Sabbath day?