

2nd Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon 6.2.24

Deuteronomy 5:12-15

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.

Mark 2:23-3:6

One sabbath he was going through the grainfields; and as they made their way his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. The Pharisees said to him, "Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?" And he said to them, "Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need of food? He entered the house of God, when Abiathar was high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and he gave some to his companions." Then he said to them, "The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath; so the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath."

Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand. They watched him to see whether he would cure him on the sabbath, so that they might accuse him. And he said to the man who had the withered hand, "Come forward." Then he said to them, "Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?" But they were silent. He looked around at them with anger; he was grieved at their hardness of heart and said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was restored. The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him. (390)

There are two versions of the Ten Commandments in the Old Testament. The biggest difference between the two is in the fourth commandment, the one about the Sabbath, the "why" of it.

In Exodus, the reason for the Sabbath is to imitate God. "Remember the Sabbath day," it reads, "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." This is a matter of *Imitatio Dei*. Keeping the Sabbath is about the imitation of God.

In Deuteronomy, it's different. It's a matter of freedom, freedom from toil. It's also a matter of justice, for this freedom is both for you and for all whose work benefits you. "Observe the Sabbath day," it reads, "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 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.” See, the Sabbath here is about rest from servitude, rest from the enslaving toil that life could otherwise amount to.

A funny thing has happened to rich people over the last 100 years or so. To be rich used to be about taking your leisure. You knew a rich man for his long hours of leisure, a rich household for their days and months of leisure. I know this from a steady diet of Merchant-Ivory films in the 90s, the landed-gentry of pastoral England always going on long holidays to India or the Mediterranean, or even just to London for some matchmaking at dances while wearing empire waist dresses.

But now, even rich people have to be seen working all the time. Really, not to work is as if a fate worse than death; not to seem so utterly essential is to cast yourself among the useless condemned. The very-wealthy: they sleep on the floor of their C-suite offices, at the Tesla complex or Apple, or the hedge fund or the start-up burning through venture capital, just so everyone knows they're never not working. They eat every meal as delivery because who has time to cook? Not when you're so incredibly important, you don't!

And it's changed the game for everyone, now that to be a slave to work is cool. (Meanwhile, the people who've been slaves to work all along are over it. And the creation, the creation itself? Yeah, it could use a moment's rest, too.)

We're back in Mark's gospel. Of the four gospels to be found in the Bible, we're back in this one, this being Mark's year, Liturgical Year B. It's been a while since we've been here. It's been since late in the season of Lent and then on Easter morning. But in the seven weeks since then, we've been mostly in John's gospel and on one occasion in Luke's. Now, though, we're embarking into Ordinary Time, these long and many weeks with not much going on. Languorous, you might say. With no holy days until the last Sunday of the church year in late November, we'll mostly follow Mark's rendering of the story of Jesus' life among us.

This will have us witnessing Jesus on the move. It will have us witnessing Jesus as having an effect on whatever is near him, an effect merely by his presence. Mark's understanding of Jesus: he will arrive on a scene which will result in what's unclean departing and taking flight. His contact

with someone wounded or sullied will have a restoring or purging effect. It's as if it was either him or them: either the presence of God or the dominant way of the world. It couldn't be both. Mark is very strident when it comes to what Jesus was about in the world. Like when a candle even weakly flickers out some light, it's not there dark anymore.

And it will all happen with immediacy, this being one of Mark's favorite words when it comes to Jesus: *euthys*, immediate or immediately. A presence of holiness that has no medium or mediator, is but sudden and real, as real as your own breath, as real as rain when it falls: Mark's understanding of who Christ is—his Christology, if you will—is about the utter reality of Jesus' being, an urgency in his healing presence and his fealty to God. Like when you put something heavy on an old soft bed, Jesus alters the warp and weft of things.

These are the matter Mark's trying to capture in words.

Which is a conundrum, of course. Mark is using the medium of the written word to communicate something immediate—an early theopoetic he is attempting here. Quite a challenge, when the word is put to the task of the immediate. But what choice did he have? The years were passing, it being now about forty years after Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection.

Worse, the existential threats that the earliest followers of the Way faced were growing more dire, Jerusalem now sacked, the Temple now destroyed, the people Israel falling to Roman violence against them in the hundreds, the thousands. Not that they could have known this, but they were at the beginning of a sixty-year war of Rome against the Jews and the early Church. What was once a thriving population, the Jews, with an urban center and a network of rural farmland and vineyard, would be reduced to remnants set to flight, thin dispersals of people hither and yon, the woodlands of the north, the desert south.

Rome, too: turns Rome could alter the warp and weft of things, as well.

We're in a turf war here, it seems. That's what some scholars of Mark claim, that we're in a turf war. It's not only the land of Judea that has fallen to an occupying force (again—Assyria, Babylon, Greece, now Rome). It's the whole world. The whole world, God's good creation, has fallen to occupying forces that have no love for what they've come to occupy, have only a mind for power and domination, servitude and exploitation, terror and tyranny and plunder.

And it was getting worse.

Or is that just always how it seems?

It would have "Mark" make the leap from the oral tradition to the written tradition, his gospel narrative perhaps as a message in a bottle that he'd toss across a sea of time in case he

himself didn't make it, and the members of the congregation for which he wrote didn't make it. The Romans could kill off the people; there was little the people could do about that. But Mark would do what he could to make sure the Romans didn't kill off the story.

And if someone somewhere from time to time would be given an immediate experience of the presence of Jesus even if only by written, read, declared word, then that was better than nothing.

You do what you can. And you trust.

By this point, in the second chapter of Mark's narrative, Jesus had been baptized, had been driven into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit to be tempted by the devil, had returned to civilization where he'd call disciples and send them out with authority akin to his, and had begun his itinerancy mostly in and around Galilee.

He had also begun to stir up controversy—and a lot earlier in the story than you might have thought, by the second chapter of sixteen chapters. This we see following these two confrontations regarding his behavior on the Sabbath. The first was when the disciples gleaned wheat from the field through which they were walking. This might be used sometime soon to make bread. The second was when he healed a man of his withered hand, a healing which came less of work than of presence. Following these perceived violations of the Sabbath law, the Pharisees who saw it all conspired with some Herodians to destroy Jesus.

Which might have been a difficult thing for them, an embittering thing for them. Pharisees reaching out to Herodians: yuck.

Herodians weren't a formal group, were just people who cozied up to Herod, a local Jewish ruler who worked closely with Romans. This made him no friend of most Jews, and still less so a friend of the typically earnest and well-meaning Pharisees. Brutal, terrifying, grotesque, Herod exercised what power he could. He killed perceived enemies with gusto, including his own brothers and sons, which had him in violation of way more than the Sabbath laws, and which made him attractive to a certain sort.

There are always a few, amiright? They want a gangster in power just to see what he'll do. There's a certain thrill in it. And they maneuver themselves to make sure they're never the ones under the gangster's boot.

These were the so-called Herodians.

They were *not* typically the Pharisees' cup of tea.

But you do what you have to. Again, amiright? And that they did so “immediately” suggests it wasn’t a rational decision, was something more of a reaction, even a repulsion—the world’s response when something of the utterly good comes along. We’d really prefer the status quo. Even those of us not so given over to the cynical political, we really do prefer the familiar over the good.

It’s hard to say what exactly the controversy was all about. These perceived violations of the Sabbath were minor, if at all. It’s as if the religious authorities were *looking* to be scandalized, which religious authorities are known for often doing. Saturday Night Live had a whole recurring skit based on this: the Church Lady saw Satan around every corner. As for this perceived scandal, I suppose it comes down to which understanding of the Sabbath is taken as authoritative, the one that commands the imitation of God or the one that commands freedom and justice even on the Sabbath, especially on the Sabbath.

They’re not necessarily at odds with one another. But sometimes to honor the one is to disregard the other.

It’s pure coincidence that this reading always appears for our consideration in church on a Sunday in early June, but I will take it as grace, when all in our region seems ready to celebrate, ready for restoration and rejuvenation. School is out, or very nearly. Summer plans are beginning to see their fruits. Windows are thrown open so the outside can come in, this suddenly most welcome neighbor, the sunlit breeze! We’ve been waiting for this détente!

This relief, this feeling of relief that is to be the gift of the Sabbath: it belongs to everyone. It should come home to everyone.

There’s a certain cruelty at play in our prideful embrace of endless toil, and there’s a far greater cruelty at work when we insist on this for others, for the ones whose work barely covers their need and so for whom the solution is this: work more.

And it might seem a feeble response to so global a problem, this by-road place of rest, this, where the seating is plentiful, the surroundings are beautiful and have been for centuries so carefully kept, and everyone is welcome to come in to take a load off. It doesn’t make it all better.

But it does bear witness to what the world should be more like, and moreover what shall surely be, Sabbath rest, equal and just rest. We wait for it. We sit and wait. And in our waiting, it comes to be.

Thanks be to God.