

**Sermon: Timeliness and Godliness**  
**Scripture: Deuteronomy 5 and Mark 2**  
**Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans**  
**Date: June 3, 2018**

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In the Hebrew creation myth in Genesis, unlike other creation myths, there is no place, no locale, that is designated as holy and sacred. God CREATES things, things are not co-equal with God, and God pronounces the things of the earth - the various elements, plants, critters therein - as “good” but God reserves God’s sanctification and blessing for one particular aspect of creation and it happens not to be not a place or a thing at all. Rather God blesses and sanctifies a time, a day. Genesis 2 says “By the 7<sup>th</sup> day God had completed the work he had done and he rested on the 7<sup>th</sup> day from all the work he had done. God blessed the 7<sup>th</sup> day and sanctified it because in it he rested from all his work.” Later in Exodus and then Deuteronomy God will offer Moses the 10 commandments and emphasize the sacredness of that time and that day by requiring the Israelites to keep it holy by resting themselves.

Because we are submerged in the water of Western culture it is hard for us to get outside of ourselves enough to see it, but this was a distinctly Jewish reality and revelation, a radically new creation myth and religious tradition wherein the divine located the DivineSelf not in things but in time.

The great Jewish theologian of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Abraham Joshua Heschel, explains that Judaism is a religion centrally concerned with the holiness in time. Some religions build great cathedrals and temples he says but Judaism built an architectural structure in time for the presence of God known as the Sabbath. For Judaism, God is not in

things of space but in moments of time. Therefore it is not things that hold sacred significance in our lives so much as time, the moment, history, which contains God and it's the time, the moment, that lends sacredness to things.

Do you hear the difference of this from how we normally think.. even those of us in Western Judeo-Christian culture for whom this should be natural? Heschel says we often think of things, materiality as the real and constant, and time as fleeting, rushing past, and somewhat abstract... but in fact it is TIME that is the constant, the stable ground of reality and things that are fleeting and passing through time.

“But we,” Heschel says, “are all infatuated with the splendor of space and the grandeur of the things of space. Thing is a category that lies heavy on our minds, tyrannizing all our thoughts... In our daily lives we attend primarily to that which the senses are spelling out for us: for what the eyes perceive and what the fingers touch. Reality to us is THINGHOOD consisting of substances that occupy space; even God is conceived by most of us as a thing. And the result of our thinginess is our blindness to all reality that fails to identify itself as a thing, as a matter of fact.” P. 5 of prologue.

But in all creation, according to Genesis, God identifies God's Divine Self with a time, a day, the 7<sup>th</sup> day, the Sabbath, and asks that the human being keep it holy by observing it through rest from all our toil. And if we were to actually do it, do you see what might begin to happen? Our thinginess gets subverted. Sabbath requires us not build or create on the 7<sup>th</sup> day because it's the Lord's Day and all that we've been laboring for over the previous 6 days must remain idle and we must turn our attention to God. All that other productivity and work that we

can become so obsessed with becomes secondary to the primacy of God. The land, that day, must lie fallow. This was also required every 7<sup>th</sup> year as well – it's harder to rape and plunder the earth with such a stop-gap measure in place. Our illusion that we control or own other people... not allowed on the Sabbath, they rest under God as everyone else does. It's a shame the asylum seeking families coming to our country aren't coming to a place that follows the 10 commandments, because otherwise they'd at least be safe on the Sabbath – “you shall not do any work on the Sabbath and nor shall your son or daughter, male or female slave or the resident alien in your towns.”

Of course this isn't our way in Western culture – far from it, actually - so taken with material gain and productivity we are... which for sure isn't all bad or unholy, though, separated from God, from it's Source it can very well become bad, where humans are burnt out and lose meaning in their lives, cogs in the machine of industry, slaves to the invisible hand of the market, where business becomes less about serving the common good and more about profit. It's the balance that the commandment to keep the Sabbath presses for, a balance that we've lost and so desperately need, the 7<sup>th</sup> day being the day to give meaning and deeper perception to the other 6 days as well. Heschel's words are beautiful in describing it. He says “six days a week we wrestle with the world, wringing profit from the earth; on the Sabbath we especially care for the seed of eternity planted in the soul. 6 days a week we seek to dominate the world, on the seventh day we try to dominate the self.” P.

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Jesus kept the Sabbath as did his disciples. Why did the women not go to the tomb on Saturday to anoint Jesus' body? Because it was

the Sabbath day and no work was allowed, only rest, so they had to wait. That's why they came on the first day of the week, Sunday. Jesus would get broiled in controversy around the Sabbath, not because he didn't care about it or think it was important but rather because he was challenging the Pharisaic compulsion and insistence on the letter of the law which trumped the spirit of it all. Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. And many of the ancient Rabbis would have agreed with Jesus - "there is nothing more important, according to the Torah than to preserve human life...even when there is the slightest possibility that a human life might be at stake one may disregard every prohibition of the law." - Mekilta. That was the teaching of one Rabbi contemporary of Jesus. This was the point Jesus was making, not disregarding the sacredness of the Sabbath, only re-establishing the centrality of it for the goodness of the human being. It had become too thingy oriented for some with an obsession over rules and regulations and he was repositioning it to be a reflection of the eternal realm of God in the course of our week.

For that's what the Sabbath is supposed to be, a day when all we DO is let go and be at ease and we give ourselves over to who we ARE in God, no striving, no accomplishing, no acquiring, just BEING. Consider it in light of Henri Nouwen's 3 lies - I am what I do, I am what I have, I am what others say about me - the Sabbath is at least one day when we are to just BE in time instead of pursuing our identity by what we do or have or the definitions others give us... rather on the Sabbath we simply ARE in God's presence.

So what does this mean for us in this day and age and in this culture when very few of us will weekly carve out a full day or rest and

attentiveness to the things of God. When very few of us would actually choose to turn off the TV and let the yard go and even eat meals prepared on another day of the week and not use money or even make plans for the week ahead... as beautiful as all that sounds, right? Well, what do we do with it then, this commandment that comes alongside, thou shall not murder and though shall not covet thy neighbors house and wife.

Well, I think, one way we can practice Sabbath is to consider the Spirit of the Sabbath in moments of time if not in days. Can we carve out Sabbath blocks of time when we cease our activity and rest and stop planning and turn off the TV and put away the phone? Can we see a practice like Centering Prayer or Meditation as 20 minutes of Sabbath keeping? Can we take note of our thinginess and the tyranny of materiality that saps our deeper needs and meaning in our lives and instead of being slaves to things, rest even when there's too much to get done? Might we release the debt that is owed to us by another in a Sabbath moment? Might we pay the worker for a day of wages unearned? Or play joyfully with the children in our lives rather than just cheering them on from the sidelines?

For we must remember that time is sacred and holy. As Heschel says "things created, conceal the Creator but it is in the dimension of time wherein the human meets God." "Six days a week we wrestle with the world, wringing profit from the earth; on the Sabbath we especially care for the seed of eternity planted in the soul. The world has our hands but our souls belong to Someone Else." Amen!

## Offertory

One of the traditional practices of Sabbath keeping is not using money to purchase things, but it doesn't mean you can't take money out and give it away... in fact that's the appropriate Sabbath day response, to offer one's resources for God's work in the week and month to come, which is what we will aim to do with your offering. We know many of you pledge and send in a monthly or quarterly gift for the work of the church and for that too we are grateful.