

"Rest [for the Soul]"

June 2, 2024

Deuteronomy 5:12-15

“Observe the Sabbath Day, to 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; in it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, or your man-servant, or your maid-servant, or your ox, or your ass, or any of your cattle, or the sojourner who is within your gates, that your man-servant and your maid-servant may rest as well as you. You shall remember that you were a servant in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out thence with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore, the LORD your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath Day.”

Dear Friends in Christ,

Rest. Relaxation. A day off. Attractive words, aren't they? People tell me again and again how busy they are, how much they would like to get away, take a break. For me, that means not going anywhere - not seeing anyone, maybe building something in my workshop. And if I don't feel like building it means finding a quiet time and reading a book. That's relaxation. That's rest.

For different people, rest means different things: It might mean a nap on the sofa, it might mean a few hours standing up to your hips in a river and fishing. It might mean farming off the kids to somebody else and listening to that strange sound -- silence! It might mean resting the brain, not having to think about anything serious. We all have different ideas of what is restful and relaxing.

But when we think of rest, here's something we don't think of. Imagine someone telling you to get your rest this way: "I want you to get up out of bed early on Sunday morning. I want you to go to church. While you are there, stand up and sit down as the liturgy flows. Sit up straight in that straight-back pew, and concentrate on the words of the hymns, the scripture readings, the sermon. Listen, learn, receive. That's how I want you to rest." Doesn't sound like our idea of R&R, does it? And yet, the Lord commands us to remember the Sabbath day, worship and all; and He calls the Sabbath day a day of rest -- worship and all. Is the Sabbath day about worship? Is worship about rest? Are we relaxed and rested when we leave church on Sunday morning? What is this third commandment about, anyway?

When God gave the Ten Commandments, he gave this one: "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy." "Observe" it! "Sanctify" it! On the seventh day, the last day of the week, the Israelites were to cease from their labors: no farming, no milling, no weaving, no work. It wasn't just a rule for adults: it was for the children, for the servants, for all. The Sabbath was to be a day of rest and a day of worship.

This was a firm command from God, though not as cold as the English makes it sound. When God commanded them to "remember" or "observe" the Sabbath day, he was saying "Be careful to keep the Sabbath, be on guard against anything that would prevent you from worship and rest, because the Sabbath has immense blessing for you." There was good in keeping this command.

Why? Why did God command them to rest like this? Some today say that this was God preventing his people from burnout; he was forcing them to put down their tools and do something else once a week. He was simply making sure that they didn't wear out their minds and bodies by overworking all

the time. He was building family time into the week by making sure that his people had one day a week to be together, one where the boss couldn't interfere.

That may be true, but that's not the reason God gives in today's text; he had something else, something greater in mind. Why were they to remember the Sabbath day? Here's the answer gives: "Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the LORD your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore, the LORD your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day." That was why they were to keep the 3rd Commandment: it was to remember God's deliverance, his care for them.

Remember, the people of Israel had been slaves in Egypt for 400 years. For slaves, there is no rest; they were called upon to provide labor at any time, seven days a week. It was back-breaking labor, it was making bricks and then making buildings out of the bricks. Seven days a week, for four hundred years.

The Israelites didn't escape slavery on their own; there was no way they could defeat Pharaoh and his armies. No, it was God who delivered them. It was God who stretched out His arm and sent ten plagues upon the Egyptians, who led his people away. It was the almighty God who parted the Red Sea with a mighty hand so that the Israelites could get through, then closed it on the Egyptian soldiers so that the Israelites were saved. When the Israelites were delivered from slavery in Egypt, they knew that it was God who had delivered them.

On that day, the people of Israel could look back and say, "Today we rest. For our ancestors in Egypt, there was no rest, for they were slaves. But because God has delivered us, today we can rest from our labors." They remembered what God had done. It was more than looking back, though; it was remembering what God was still doing for them. In other words, at the Sabbath, God's people said: "For the last six days, we have labored to get things done. Today we rest; and as we do so, we remember not to trust in our labors, but to trust in God who gives us all good things." It was also, Scripture tells us, a time to remember God's promises of what he would do in the future for his people, that he would send a Savior to give them eternal rest.

You can see, then, why the Sabbath would be the day for worship; as they remembered all that God had done, was doing, and would do, it was only appropriate to hear those promises in his saving Word, and to sing his praises.

"Observe the Sabbath day," commanded the Lord. "Keep it, guard it, don't let it be lost." With good reason: if the Israelites lost the Sabbath and its meaning, it meant that they had lost their trust in God who provided. That would mean that they were lost, too.

Our Lord still commands us today: "Observe the Sabbath day by keeping it holy, as the LORD your God has commanded you." Guard it, keep it, remember it, treasure it. What does it mean now? The New Testament tells us that this commandment has changed a little: The Sabbath (whatever day of the week it is observed) is still to be a day of worship and rest, but we do not have to cease from labor for the rest of the day after worship. Why? Because, in a very real and profound way, worship is our rest. This hour or so of Divine Service is the most restful, rest-filled and resting hour of the week.

You see, by nature we have unrest with God; because of our sinfulness, we are not at peace with him. Rather, we are slaves to sin and at war with God, the Bible tells us. There is only one way that we can have peace with God, that we can be at rest with him: that is to have our sins taken away. This is why Jesus went to the cross: to take away our sin, to give us peace with God. By his death, he has taken away our sin and guilt, and God no longer holds those sins against us; he forgives all who trust in him. He takes away our sin, he makes us at rest with him; and in his care, he gives us rest, forgiveness, life and salvation.

This is the profound reason for worship, for Divine Service: It is here that our Lord takes the forgiveness won at the cross and gives it to us. In his Word and sacraments, he is giving us forgiveness, he is taking away our sins. By taking away our sin, he is setting us at peace with God--he is giving us rest in God. We don't gather for worship so that God can get a head count of who's being faithful; we gather here because this is where our Lord comes to be present with us, forgiving our sins.

Do you see why we are to remember/observe/guard and keep the Sabbath, to consistently gather for worship? It is here that we receive the rest we need! It's not physical relaxation or mental refreshment; it's rest for the soul, given in the forgiveness of sins.

Now, as you can imagine, the devil, the world and our own sinful flesh have a nasty reaction to forgiveness, faith and life; so all sorts of sins are available to cause us to break the 3rd Commandment and no longer treasure the Sabbath day.

The most obvious is skipping worship, replacing it with something else on Sunday morning: an extra hour's sleep, more time at the office, a camping trip, time with the family. Whenever we replace the Sabbath day with something else that we deem more fun or more important, we are no longer treasuring it as we should. We are saying, "God is coming to church today with his Word and sacraments for me, but I have better things to do." These other things are great temptations, because they can leave us feeling more refreshed in mind and body; they can trick us into believing that they did more for us than church would have. But those activities can't forgive sins, they can't give us rest for our souls.

Now, that one is "preaching to the choir" because you're here this morning. But, you know, there is a more subtle way of breaking the third commandment: That's to attend worship in body, but be absent in mind. In other words, if we're at church, standing and sitting, singing and speaking, but our minds are off in dreamland, we are still breaking the 3rd commandment. One of the greatest enemies of Sunday morning is a late Saturday night; and as a result, we might be here, but our brains are still in bed.

Remember. God gathers us here to give us his gifts! If we sit through worship and allow our minds to wander, we are rejecting his gifts simply by failing to receive them. We've done the same thing as if we'd come to the dinner table and not eaten anything, then wondered why we're hungry. We've starved our faith. Make no mistake, worship requires concentration; it is not a place to sit back and expect to soak things in while your mind wanders elsewhere. That is precisely what the devil wants us to do; then we are tempted to leave unrested, but thinking that we have been forgiven.

There is a third, dangerous way to break that commandment, and it has to do with emotional disappointment. What I mean is this: As human beings we are sometimes tempted to leave church saying, "That service didn't do much for me because...." Because the pews were hard. Because there weren't many people there. Because the service went long. Because the babies were crying. Because the pastor chose difficult hymns and nobody sang.

I'm not trying to make excuses for difficult hymn tunes here. The danger is that we tend to equate "getting something out of the service" with "feeling satisfied" when we go. If we don't feel emotionally recharged, we tend to feel disappointed, as if worship was a waste of time.

And here we arrive at a word of warning. Our Lord promises rest and peace in his Word and Sacraments. But it's not a physical rest that leaves our bodies feeling rejuvenated when we leave. Nor is it rest for the mind, leaving us feeling mentally refreshed and emotionally "up" when we depart. The rest that our Lord gives us is rest for the soul, the forgiveness of sins won at the cross. Often, this rest is hidden; it can only be known by faith.

God often acts in hidden ways, and we see that nowhere more than at the cross. To the eye, the cross looks like only bad news; there the Son of God is executed by sinful man. To our physical sight, it's a gory, hopeless picture. But by faith, we see the hidden gift. We see that, although the cross looks like defeat, it is actually victory; for it is in his death that Jesus robs sin of its power and gives us eternal life. Again, you can't see it with human eyes, only by faith.

God's work is hidden at the cross. Not one of Jesus' followers watched the crucifixion and said, "That was inspiring." It was so repulsive that they ran away. But though it looked terrible, God was accomplishing his plan of salvation.

So it is with the rest that our Lord gives us in worship. It is here, in God's Word and sacraments, that we find rest for our souls. It is here that we receive forgiveness of sins, life and salvation. But, consistent with how our Lord works, these gifts are hidden. They are hidden in the words of Scripture, in the water of Baptism, in the assurance of absolution, in the bread and wine of the Eucharist. They are not felt, they are not seen; they can only be trusted in.

Because our Lord's gifts are hidden, we arrive at a word of warning and a word of comfort. The word of warning is this: Let us be careful not to measure a service by how it leaves us feeling emotionally or physically; and let us repent when we do so. Let us instead rejoice that our Lord is providing rest for our souls and forgiving our sins, even if the pews are hard, the service long, the hymn-tunes challenging. Whether or not we feel God's presence, he is here; to doubt his presence because we don't feel him is to rely on our emotions rather than his promise.

The word of comfort is this: Again, whether or not we feel God's presence, he is here. True to his promise, he is working through his Word and sacraments to forgive us, to strengthen our faith, to remove our sin and guilt, to give us life everlasting. This is the comfort for us as we endure trials, because it is in the midst of trials that it becomes impossible for us to be emotionally happy. When we are sick or injured, we will leave worship feeling physically "down" and tired because of the sickness and injury; but that doesn't mean that our Lord has failed to give us rest! He has been true to his promise, and he has taken away our sin, giving us the hope of an eternal life **without** sickness and

injury. Likewise, when we are filled with troubled thoughts and grief, we cannot expect to leave church feeling happy and care-free; but even if we are still emotionally "down," our Lord has given us rest; he will carry us through those trials that trouble.

A few summers ago a man and wife from a congregation were in an automobile accident. The husband was driving and his wife was killed in the car accident. The man was physically injured - not badly, but it would be a while before his hand worked properly again. But more than that, his heart was filled with grief and his conscience riddled with guilt, for his wife died when he missed a stop sign. It will be a long time before he feels physically whole again; on this earth, he may never be rid of the grief and guilt that drag him down right now. But we can even offer him this hope: Our Lord is faithful to his promises, and so we rejoice that his wife will be raised on the Last Day, that even now she enjoys eternal rest with her Savior. And in the meantime, he has rest for the man, too. Our Lord -- who died with the sin and guilt of the world, died for the man's sin, too; he forgives the man even now, and will raise him up sin-free and guilt-free on the Last Day.

"Observe the Sabbath day by keeping it holy," God commanded. Guard it, keep it, treasure it, don't let anything get in its way. Why? Because it is in his Word and sacraments that he gives us rest -- forgiveness and hope, life and salvation. Our Lord Jesus declared, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." We thankfully remember the Sabbath today, because here our Lord remembers and rests us: In his gift of forgiveness given today, he does indeed give us that promised rest. Amen.