

SERMON TITLE: "What Are People For?"

TEXT: Exodus 20:8-11; Deuteronomy 5:13-15

PREACHED AT: Neighbourhood Church

BY: Ryan Dueck

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We are at the end of August and at the end of our three-week "Summer Sampler" series. At the outset, I said that I wasn't going to map out the whole series, I was simply going to touch down at various points of Scripture and see where God would direct and what God might have to say to us as we near the end of summer and gear up for fall.

Two weeks ago we talked about the nature of faith—how it was more like a journey with a compass and a map than a dump truck with an answer box in the back.

Last week we looked at Luke 13:10-17 where Jesus healed a woman on the Sabbath, thus challenging a whole host of worldview assumptions, both for the religious elites of the synagogue and for a marginalized, suffering woman.

Today we're going to shift things a bit. We've spent one Sunday in the book of Hebrews, one in Luke, so today—because a "Summer Sampler" series ought to have diversity—we are going to look at a few passages in the Old Testament.

I had loosely intended to end this mini-sermon series with some kind of a rousing call to action as we head into fall, but that's not what we're going to do today.

We're going to talk about Sabbath.

It's possible that over the last few weeks with all this talk about how faith is a journey as opposed to a list of rules or answers or doctrines or practices, and about how Jesus broke rules on the Sabbath and set people free from legalism, that some of you might be wondering if a life of faith is just pure freedom.

Well, I think that Jesus is about freedom but with freedom there is always a freedom *from* and a freedom *for*. Jesus sets us free *from* burdens and unhealthy guilt and obligation. He sets us free from legalism and rules that load us down for no good reason. This is certainly true.

But he also sets us free *for* the lives that we were created to live. He gives us the freedom to live according to patterns that are healthy and life giving and restorative.

I think we see this in the case of the Sabbath. Last week we saw how Jesus healed on the Sabbath to show how the leaders of the synagogue had misunderstood and misinterpreted and abused what the Sabbath was for. It had become a burden for people, as opposed to something that brought life and healing.

So what is Sabbath? And what was it supposed to be? What is it supposed to do? Jesus clearly wasn't saying that the Sabbath wasn't important, but he was calling the religious leaders to examine what they had turned it into and he was calling them back to the proper understanding and observance of Sabbath.

So how *are* we supposed to understand the Sabbath? We're going to look at two passages today—one from Exodus 20 and one from Deuteronomy 5—that lay out what Sabbath is for.

A RELUCTANT SABBATH-KEEPER

But before we get there, a story ☺. You may have noticed that I often include some story from my own life in my sermons. Maybe you think that's a good thing, maybe you don't. I can only appeal to the words of Henry David Thoreau:

I should not talk so much about myself if there were anybody else whom I knew so well. Unfortunately, I am confined to this theme by the narrowness of my experience.

So, with that...

When I was a kid, I was often a very reluctant Sabbath-keeper.

It wasn't that I hated church or anything. I didn't particularly enjoy the sermons, but Sunday School was pretty good, I enjoyed seeing my friends, I didn't mind the singing. Church was a very social place where a lot was usually going on. We had a big gym in the church, so there was ball hockey and basketball and all kinds of other stuff. There were long corridors in the basement where we could get lost and hide and cause trouble.

So. It wasn't that I didn't like being at church. Rather, I didn't like being in church *when I had a hockey game!*

Hockey was very clearly the number one thing in my life for most of my childhood. But *sometimes* my games were sometimes scheduled for Sunday mornings. That was a problem.

My parents made a deal with my brother and I. On the occasions that there was a game on Sunday, we could play one and then miss one. It was a kind of compromise.

My parents were not pharisaic about church attendance. They knew that we were involved in youth group and we would often go to Sunday School before hockey, but

they also very clearly wanted us to know that attending church as a family was a priority.

So this seemed like a good middle ground. Hockey wasn't just dismissed, but neither did it automatically trump church attendance.

But, not surprisingly, this wasn't good enough for me! Few things pained me more than missing a hockey game. The thought that I would be sitting on a hard wooden pew listening to a boring sermon while my friends were in the midst of the drama and glory of the southern Alberta hockey world... Well. It was almost too much to take.

For me, church attendance came to seem, on select winter Sundays, like an experience that was specifically designed to make me miserable.

In our story last Sunday, Sabbath for the religious leaders was about *not* doing the right things; for me, it was about *doing* the right thing, namely, parking myself in church from 9:30-12:00 *every Sunday morning*.

Not a very healthy view of Sabbath.

SABBATH: WHAT AND WHY?

So what is Sabbath?

Well, for the answer to that we need to back to the Old Testament, back to the Ten Commandments in particular.

There are two versions of the Ten Commandments: one in Exodus and one in Deuteronomy. The passage in Exodus describes the first giving of the Ten Commandments, while the passage in Deuteronomy is the re-telling of them as the Israelites prepare to enter the land of Canaan.

The two versions are virtually identical, except for on the fourth commandment (which is also, interestingly, the longest of the ten commandments).

What we quickly see in both versions of the Ten Commandments are the themes of keeping the Sabbath holy and the theme of rest. Somehow, our resting is a means of keeping the Sabbath holy.

I'm going to read them both because there is an important difference that we need to pay attention to. First, Exodus 20:8-11:

READ EXODUS 20:8-11

Now we're going to read this commandment again, this time from Deuteronomy 5:

READ DEUTERONOMY 5:13-15

Notice a difference?

The difference between the two passages is in the "why."

In **Exodus**, the Israelites are commanded to rest and to keep the Sabbath holy *because of who God is and what God has done*. God rested therefore you also ought to rest.

The creation of the world itself involved rest, not because God was wiped out or had ran out of ideas or anything like that.

Rather, rest is healthy and God wanted to model for his image-bearers healthy ways of living and working.

Rest was built into the very structure of creation as a way of getting our attention! In Exodus we are reminded: God rested, and you must rest too.

In pointing to the fact that God rested after creation, the writer is reminding us, ironically, that we are not God.

If God, who is perfect and powerful and infinitely resourceful and does not have the limitations and weaknesses that we do, rested, *how much more* should we, who are not perfect, who have profound limits on our power and resources, and who have many limitations and weaknesses rest?

We are commanded to imitate God to remind ourselves that we are not God and to stop trying to be God by pretending that unless we keep frantically working the world will fall apart.

In Exodus, we are commanded to rest because rest is part of how the world was made and we are invited to be a part of this. God modeled it for us. I like how Mark Buchanan puts it in *The Rest of God*:

God, knowing both our need and our folly, took the lead. He set the example. Like a parent who coaxes a cranky toddler to lie down for an afternoon by lying down beside her, God woos us into rest by resting.

In Exodus, the commandment to rest is grounded in our remembering of who God is!

In **Deuteronomy**, rather than pointing to the creation of the world, we are directed to a liberation story.

Remember.... You were slaves, you were never given a day off, you were treated like meat. You were considered of no importance. And you were set free—the Lord brought you out of this dehumanizing situation with a mighty hand.

Therefore.... You are commanded to observe the Sabbath. You are commanded to rest. You are commanded to consider yourselves as God considers you—not divine, but not mere cogs in the economic wheel of an empire, either!

Life is not about frenetic activity. We were created for work, certainly, but not *just* work.

We were created to enjoy the work of the Lord (in creation, in our fellow human beings) and the work of our hands. We were created to need and enjoy rejuvenation, restoration, renewal, and relaxation.

That's how human beings "run best." It's how we were put together. The need for rest is in our DNA and Exodus tells us that this is a *good thing!*

So, we have two very good reasons for keeping Sabbath. One because of who God is and how God works, and the other because of who we are and how we work.

The result is very clear: Sabbath rest is not optional.

TOO BUSY FOR SABBATH?

It's also very clear that we live in a culture that doesn't do Sabbath. We don't understand or acknowledge our need for rest.

Many people are chronically over-scheduled, stressed out, anxious, depressed, and forever scrambling to do enough to "get ahead."

We have more gadgets and toys and computer programs to organize our lives and communicate with one another from anywhere in the world, but the result is that we feel like we must always be available. We become slaves to our machines.

The time all blurs together—increasingly the divisions between "work" and "play" are becoming obsolete.

We're not very good at resting, are we?

Maybe one of the reasons why the fourth commandment is the longest and has the most explanation around it, is because God knew it would be the hardest of the ten for us to keep. Don't murder? Pretty simple. Rest? That's a little harder...

I don't know about you, but I find rest difficult.

I look ahead to September and I see a very large "to do" list and a very full schedule. I see work and hockey practices and swim club and piano lessons and care groups and meetings and visitors from out of town and writing assignments and how Naomi and I will coordinate our schedules and.... It's easy to feel overwhelmed and to wonder where on earth there will be time for *rest* in there!

I'm guessing many of you have similar sentiments as you look ahead to September. Perhaps you are wondering where you are going to find the time to do everything that needs to be done. Perhaps you are already feeling weary.

I think that all of us need this double reminder from Israel's past that learning how to take a Sabbath, to rest, is not something we do if we can get around to it.

It's not something we'll see if we can find time for. It is not something we do to reward ourselves once the work is all done. It isn't a prize we get for doing all of our work well each week.

Rather, it is God's gracious provision for our needs as human beings.

It's worth remembering that Israel was initiated into the importance of Sabbath-keeping during one of the most precarious times of their existence. They knew nothing of air-conditioning or minivans or laptops or summer cabins. They were a tribe of desert nomads, often short of water and food, not really knowing where they were going or what would await them when they got there.

And in this context, they are commanded to rest. To take one day to *just stop*.

Sabbath is God's invitation to rest, to enjoy time with our families, to enjoy creation, to pray, to reflect, to read, to cease from the activities and tasks and obligations and distractions that can so easily come to dominate our days, weeks, months, and years.

The gift of Sabbath is God's reminder that we are not machines. Just like in the Deuteronomy passage, we are commanded to rest in order to remember that we are not slaves—even if our slavery is self-imposed!

[BACK TO CHURCH](#)

Getting back to my initial story, all these years after my childhood angst about church and hockey, I have come to see that church attendance is an important part of Sabbath, as long as we see it properly.

There will always be unpredictable work schedules. There will always be trips that must be taken. There will always be things like special hockey tournaments and swim meets that are important parts of kids' lives and that should be enjoyed as the gifts that they are.

But attending church is a crucial part of Sabbath—not just as one more obligation to add to the list, one more thing to do at the end of a long week of things to do.

Rather, church is a place where we can take the time to reorder our lives, to consider anew what God is calling us to—as individuals, families, and as a church.

It ought to be a time where we once again consider our story in the context of the larger story of what God is doing in and for his world.

It ought to be a time where our perspectives are reoriented and retrained according to the story of Scripture.

There is always work to do. As you saw in this morning's announcements, there are programs that need volunteers, there will be soup lunches to plan, kids to teach, music to learn and practice, etc, etc. As we head into our fall schedule and two services, we will need more people to share the load, to make sure that we continue to be a place where we do our best to build committed followers of Jesus Christ.

But we work better when we work within the parameters God has given us. We work better when we deliberately, consciously, and intentionally honour God by resting.

We work better when we have allowed the two truths of Exodus and Deuteronomy...

1. We are not God
2. We are not slaves

... to become a part of the very foundation of how we look at our lives and our relationship with God.

SABBATH AND TRUST

Fundamentally, Sabbath-keeping as an act of *trust*. We trust that God knows us better than we know ourselves, and that in commanding us to rest, God has our best interests in mind.

We trust that God is God and we are not. No matter how busy we keep ourselves, we cannot do God's work.

We trust that we are not as indispensable as we think we are, that the world will keep on turning without our frantic activities for 24 hrs.

Last week we talked about how Jesus viewed the Sabbath. In Mark 2:27, Jesus says this:

The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.

What an amazing thing—we were not made to be slaves to an artificially imposed system of rules and regulations; rather, **Sabbath was made for us!**

I will close with a wonderful quote from Buchanan's book. He tells the story of the following conversation between Martin Luther and Philipp Melanchthon:

Philipp Melanchthon turned to Martin Luther and announced, "Today, you and I shall discuss the governance of the universe." Luther looked at Melanchthon and said, "No. Today, you and I shall go fishing and leave the governance of the universe to God."

This is our invitation as we head into a new year.

Let's work joyfully and enthusiastically at the things God has given us to do and gifted us to do.

But let's also be sure to remember: we are not God... and we are not slaves.

Let's cultivate the discipline of rest to honour God and to keep the Sabbath holy.

Amen

