

Today's second reading comes from Isaiah, chapter 58, verses 9-14. Listen for God's word to you this day:

Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer;  
you shall cry for help, and he will say, "Here I am."

If you remove the yoke from among you,  
the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,

<sup>10</sup> if you offer your food to the hungry  
and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,

then your light shall rise in the darkness  
and your gloom be like the noonday.

<sup>11</sup> The Lord will guide you continually  
and satisfy your needs in parched places  
and make your bones strong,

and you shall be like a watered garden,  
like a spring of water  
whose waters never fail.

<sup>12</sup> Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;  
you shall raise up the foundations of many generations;  
you shall be called the repairer of the breach,  
the restorer of streets to live in.

<sup>13</sup> If you refrain from trampling the Sabbath,  
from pursuing your own interests on my holy day;

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if you call the Sabbath a delight  
and the holy day of the Lord honorable;  
if you honor it, not going your own ways,  
serving your own interests or pursuing your own affairs;  
<sup>14</sup> then you shall take delight in the Lord,  
and I will make you ride upon the heights of the earth;  
I will feed you with the heritage of your ancestor Jacob,  
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.

This is the Word of God for the people of God...thanks be to God.

Last week we wrapped up our worship series, Finding Rest and Practicing Sabbath, and then this week we find ourselves with two texts about the sabbath. Two texts that give us instruction on how to live out the sabbath from a place of compassion and grace.

In Ecclesiastes we are told there is nothing new under the sun. What has been will be again. Which is true. However, there is something that is new: our understanding, the knowledge we have as human beings. To know that the Earth is round and not flat, to know that our biological makeup is determined by DNA and that we share similar DNA with other mammals. To know that Earth is part of a galaxy and there are other galaxies beyond ours, to know that the way we relate to other people and cultures is often determined by our openness to learning about them, listening to them and trusting what they tell us. None of it is new, but our way of understanding and knowing is constantly

evolving. This is why when we read scripture we look at the historical context and we also take into consideration what science, and medicine, and technology, and discovery have taught us about that thing since the scriptures were written.

The people of God, the Israelites, have been in exile and have now returned to their homeland. To a place that no longer looks like it did when they left. Returning brings a whole new set of challenges to their life together and their life with God.

Professor James Limberg offers this commentary on the historical context and significance of this text for us. He says, “the people have returned from exile in Babylon and are now a small group gathered around Jerusalem, hoping to get the temple rebuilt for worship (the work of Haggai and Zechariah), a wall put around the city for security (Nehemiah) and religion back into the lives of all the people (Ezra’s concern).”<sup>1</sup>

“A careful reading of Isaiah 58 gives us a picture of the problems in the community. Their *relationship to their God* was not what it should be. The people were fasting, but God didn’t seem to pay attention (v.3). In fact, what should have been days of worship turn out to be times of fighting and hypocrisy (vv.4-5) And they were not observing the Sabbath days, but using them for their own interests and gain (58:13-14).

Nor was their *relationship to their neighbor* what it should be. Wealthy citizens were oppressing their workers and were not paying them minimum wages! (vv. 6-7). People

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<sup>1</sup> James Limberg, August 21, 2016, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-21-3/commentary-on-isaiah-589b-14-2>

with property and money should be caring for the hungry and the homeless in their community, but they neglected them. Neglecting worship and day-by-day religion, commercializing the Sabbath, not caring for the poor and needy — such was the situation the prophet had to address.”<sup>2</sup>

This passage along with the gospel reading reiterates for us what we’ve been focusing our attention on the past 6 weeks. As we find rest and practice sabbath there is a need to consider our personal relationship with God and our relationship with neighbor, with those outside ourselves. The focus solely on our own well-being, even our own relationship with God, or our own table, leaves us missing the mark of true relationship as intended by God and lived out by Jesus the Christ among us.

In the Luke reading Jesus responds in the moment to the needs of a woman who has been hunched over for 18 years. He did not wait for the next day, the non-sabbath day to tend to her needs, he addressed them then. And, in our Isaiah text we hear the prophet telling the people if they honor the sabbath, if they remove the yoke of their culture and society from them, if they tend to those in need in their midst, then they will find delight in God. The sabbath is a practice of honoring and recognizing God, not just in our minds but in the world around us, which draws us into the heart of the matter, an experience of sabbath that is relational and allows for responses that are compassionate, caring, and merciful. When the children went on the sabbath walk at the

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<sup>2</sup> ibid

beginning of the worship series and came back to worship sharing with us the ways they saw God in the world they were practicing sabbath by looking out from themselves and into God's creation, seeing where God exists beyond themselves and allowing themselves to appreciate God's presence outside of their own bodies.

Last week David concluded by sharing with you a suggested recipe for sabbath keeping from Danielle Pathak, which included asking yourself questions around three main points: Rest, Delight, and Contemplation.

There is a fourth element that I would add: Action. Not that Sabbath requires action, but we must acknowledge that it allows for action. Our faith calls us to action and our sabbath rest is a refueling of that faith. The texts of Isaiah and Luke are important reminders to us that we cannot become bogged down in the legalistic practice of sabbath, or any other tradition for that matter, that we lose sight of the needs around us, that we lose sight of living the very faith we proclaim.

Our God is a loving and kind God, a God that cares deeply for creation. Therefore, God does not demand that we keep our holy practices separate from the life being lived out just outside our doors, no rather God reminds us that we are invited into that life, that our tending to the needs of the afflicted is holy practice. Tending to the stranger whose story we don't even know is holy practice. All of the internal connection with God we have been emphasizing, the heart work that we've been practicing this summer, is what leads us to act from our hearts.

I was in a meeting the past two days for Committee on Ministry with the Presbytery and we spent a significant amount of time discussing moving from our heads to our hearts, we used language about not being so bound up by policies and procedures that we miss the ministry we've been called to do. That's a risk for all of us, right? We can become so focused on the technicalities that we miss the chance to be faithful in the practice of our faith.

The technicalities are the things that kill momentum, that drain the energy right out of the room, the technicalities are the things that limit the movement of the holy spirit. Yes, it means we have less control, that the fences that divide what is right and what is wrong begin to fall, but wasn't that exactly what Jesus was showing us to do? When we're figuring out what to be yoked to, the structures that restrict access to God, or the healing touch of Jesus Christ, it's worth exploring if we are focusing more on technicalities or on a living faith, if we are focusing more on what we want and how we want it than on how God gives us freedom to experience life in community. The answers don't come easily and loosening the reins takes time, but maybe that's what it means to keep practicing sabbath, continuing to build trust, and find rest, and contemplate, and delight and be led to action. People have been working on it since the beginning of time.

So it is true, there is nothing new under the sun, at least for us humans. What was true for the Israelites returning from exile, and was true for the first century Jews gathered around Jesus, is also true for us today. We are just learning new ways of understanding

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and relating and existing. And it turns out we need to be reminded that God longs to be in relationship with us personally, that God calls us to relationship with one another, to care for our neighbors, and as you continue to practice sabbath, of honoring God, may you find delight in God, may you be led to action that offers the light and love of Christ to a world, a religion, a people so desperately in need of being freed from the yoke of technicalities. And, may you embrace a life yoked to the healing Christ.