

**Dedicate yourselves to God<sup>1</sup>**  
**Pre-sabbatical sermon**  
**August 16, 2015**  
**Exodus 20:8, Genesis 2:1-3 and Leviticus 7:1-7**

So, I've been thinking about this pre-sabbatical sermon for well over a month, and I had all kinds of notes, and great plans.

I was already excited to tell you something about the creation care theme that I'm going to investigate as part of my sabbatical.

In preparation for this sermon, I wanted to read all of Pope Francis' most recent Encyclical entitled *Care of our Common Home*, because it's precisely about the things I want to investigate - the theology and faith based foundation for Creation care. In other words I wanted to get a good start on all my sabbatical related things before my sabbatical even arrived.

In fact, I did start reading for my sabbatical already back in January, I was so excited about the time I was going to have to do that kind of thing.

Well, this week when I finally got around to re-reading the scripture texts that describe the Sabbath, how it began and what it's for, I realized that I was a bit off track. Okay, not a little bit, a lot off track, for you see, I already felt guilty about taking a break and so I was making sure I will have lots of productive things to do. And I also thought, if I'm going to go away and be renewed and refreshed then what about all of you? Can't that be true for all of you as well? Okay, so if it can't be true for you just now, then I won't let it be true for me either, right? That makes sense.

Clearly its time to reground ourselves in what our scriptures say about Sabbath.

Strong's concordance tells me that Sabbath is mentioned 141 times in 120 verses. Based on my investigation of some of those verses, the following will be a brief summary of what Sabbath is all about.

1. The Sabbath as part of God's law and commandments is the gift of God for the people of God.

Genesis 2:1-3, God does all God's work of creation on six days, then stops working and blesses the seventh day and sets it apart as a special day.

There it is, in the very foundation of creation there is a time for rest, there is a rhythm of work and rest established by God.

2. Observe the Sabbath and keep it Holy. This phrase comes from Exodus and in that context, it is the fourth commandment out of ten primary commandments. The first three commandments speak about a right

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relationship with God and the last six speak about right relationship with others.

This, the fourth commandment is the bridge. Keeping Sabbath holy respects and renews our relationship with God and with others and the whole creation. The Sabbath is for dedicating yourself to God and it is for everyone and everything.

“the seventh day is a day of rest dedicated to me.

“On the seventh day no one is to work – neither you, your children, your slaves, your animals, nor the foreigners who live in your country.”

God reminds the Israelites, “in six days, I made the earth, the sky, the seas and everything in them, but on the seventh day I rested. That is why I, the Lord, blessed the Sabbath and made it holy.

3. The rhythm of Sabbath extends beyond the seventh day to the seventh year and the 50<sup>th</sup> year in Leviticus 25. Here we have the foundation for the concept of sabbatical, an extended period of rest. Sabbath rest of land and the restoration of land to original owners remind the people that the earth is the Lord’s and all that it in it. We can never really own land. We merely pay for the privilege of being responsible for portions of it from time to time.
4. Finally, without God and without the Sabbath we are slaves. The Israelites were slaves in Egypt, and God called them out of Egypt to be a people for God. In several of the 141 mentions of Sabbath, God reminds the people that he took them out of slavery so that they would be free to worship God and God alone. Without the Sabbath, we become slaves to the empire of the day. Slaves to our own sense of indispensability and slaves to an endlessly demanding machine. God knows we are not machines, nor should we worship machines. We and the creatures and the land were not created to live without healthy rhythms of work and rest. Sabbath keeping reminds us weekly, and cyclically in other ways that our lives are dedicated to God and not to any other source.

One day a week, every seven years, and every 50 years if we keep Sabbath we are indebted solely to God’s provision and to God’s grace and to God’s creative power. Not our own. On six days you will do all your work but the seventh will be a Sabbath to the Lord.

In Leviticus it sounds like this.

When you enter the land that God is giving you, you shall honor the Holy One by not cultivating the land every seventh year. You shall plant your fields, prune your vineyards, and gather your crops for six years. But the seventh year is to be a year of complete rest for the land, a year dedicated to the eternal one. .... Although the land has not been cultivated during that year, it will provide food for you, your slaves, your hired men, the foreigners living with you, your domestic animals, and the wild animals in your fields, Everything that it produces may be eaten. This kind of flies in the face of the proverb – if you don’t work you won’t eat. Hmmm.

This fall I begin my seventh year at TUMC as lead pastor and you have graciously allowed me to respect that seventh year by taking a four-month sabbatical, a time of

rest. A time where I can rededicate myself to the God upon whose grace and creative power I depend daily.

I am deeply grateful.

This also happens to be my 50<sup>th</sup> year of life. Thanks be to God that I am able to celebrate my personal Jubilee year in this way.

My sabbatical is not a time to be productive, as I am tempted to do. My sabbatical is a time to dedicate myself to God and a time to remember and depend on God's grace and provision. This is a gift to me. I pray that it will be a gift to all of you too when I return.

Already I'm dreaming of a time when we can take a communal Sabbath as God ordains. What would that look like? Can you imagine it?

In Exodus 31:14,15 and 35:2 those who do not keep the Sabbath – special days and times dedicated to God - will be put to death. Is this an exaggerated way of saying that our very lives may depend on learning to keep the Sabbath? Do we need to learn or re-learn to dedicate ourselves to God who frees us from all that would enslave us.

This whole dedicating oneself to God thing is not easy. After I finished writing my sermon yesterday I started packing for my flight that leaves first thing on Monday morning. This is a flight through Vancouver to Sandspit, Haida Gwaii, north of Vancouver Island. We've been warned by our tour guides that checked luggage is not making it all the way to Sandspit, and so we must take everything essential for 8 days of kayaking in carry-on luggage.

I packed and repacked last night and will pack and re-pack again tonight, trying to determine what things are the most essential for this adventure.

When I woke from a light sleep this morning, my mind had been working on this dilemma all night and I realized it was the perfect illustration of that to which my sabbatical invites me.

I am being invited to pare down the next few months to those carry on items that are essential for my adventure with God, for my rededication to God. Maybe the Rabbinic tradition is on to something when they impose restrictions on carrying and moving things. Sabbath or Shabbat observance I suppose could feel restrictive, however, I suspect that in its purest form, in its intent, it was meant to free the people from all that is not essential so that there was more time, space, energy, mental, emotional, physical and spiritual to dedicate oneself to God.

Finally my prayer for all of us in this time is that whether on sabbatical, like me, or here carrying on doing the things to which you have been called, let us dedicate all of this to the God who longs for us to be fully alive and free. And remember that God will sustain us more fully than all the things we think we need to cram into carry on or checked luggage. May it be so.