

Keeping Sabbath, Practicing Trust, Living Shalom

Exodus 16:1-5, 22-30

February 12, 2017

This sermon is in many ways part 2 of my sermon a few weeks ago on chaos. In fact, I had intended to include aspects of Sabbath in that sermon, but for various reasons, not least of which was the length of the sermon, I dropped the Sabbath aspect. The discussion in the sermon response class, however, prompted me to focus on Sabbath for this sermon, as I think Sabbath is a good counter-balance to chaos.

For those of you with memories like mine, you won't have even remembered that I preached a few weeks ago, let alone what I preached on! So, let me in a couple sentences, summarize what I said. Scientists have discovered that when they track chaotic systems over a period of time, there is built into chaos itself, an order or boundary to that chaos, and with computers, they can see the patterns that emerge out of chaos. As we experience various kinds of chaos in our own lives and in our world, this scientific discovery can assure us that chaos will not have the last word. Creation itself was an ordering of chaos, which happened at the Word of God, so we can trust that in the midst of chaos, God is at work and God is control.

I think we would all agree that in this time in our political life and in our world, there is a lot of chaos. Adjusting to a new administration, with new executive orders, has changed the way things work. We have seen how pockets of this country have been galvanized to action in response to these changes. And here at Berkey, we have been galvanized in a new way to live Christ's loving, healing caring presence in our community and our world, as we consider how we are being called to care for the vulnerable, the homeless, those at risk of discrimination and violence. The chaos of this time, the blatant discrimination and hate speech, have called us to action.

As Christians, and particularly as Mennonites, we take very seriously the idea that faith without works is not faith at all. We believe that if we confess with our lips that Christ is Lord, then our lives and our actions should also confess that Christ is Lord. Mennonites are very good at doing; at responding to disasters and crises around the world; at responding with care and compassion through meals and

concrete acts of care when someone in the community is suffering. We have a robust and active ethic for living our Christian faith.

And there is so much to do these days. Social media and our connection through technology to our friends, our work, the news, Facebook, keeps us also constantly connected to all that is happening in the world. We know when and where the latest hurricane or earthquake struck; we know about the tornadoes in Louisiana this week, and perhaps we're already thinking about how Mennonite Disaster Service will be involved. We've known about the war in Syria for a long time and have followed the flow of refugees from that country to Europe and other parts of the world. We have images of individual refugees, children caught in the trauma of war, homelessness, and faulty boats. And of course we know about the anti-Muslim sentiments that are present in this country and other parts of the world; we know about the distrust of undocumented immigrants and the racism and hatred that have been directed at people of colour. We know about school shootings, police shootings of young black men, the wall between Mexico and the US. We know about the people who will lose healthcare if the Affordable Care Act is abolished before there is something adequate to replace it.

We are being invited to join this protest or that march, to sign this petition or take this action. There is so much to do these days, for Christians, for people of conscience, for followers of Jesus. Our faith is being tested; our resolve is being challenged. Perhaps even the sincerity of our faith is being questioned, depending on how we respond to these many invitations to action.

I wonder if the Israelites, there in the wilderness of Sin (there's no connection to our English word, "sin") felt overwhelmed, not so much with the bombardment of things needing their attention, but overwhelmed by the vastness of the wilderness, and the limits of their resources. It's easy to hear their complaining as the whining of exaggeration—you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill us with hunger; sounds like the times I've felt like I'm "starving to death", or one of my kids has said they were "dying of hunger". And yet, I think their hunger was very real, as was their fear. That fear clouded their memories of their life in Egypt—as slaves, it is doubtful that they "sat with the fleshpots of Egypt and ate their fill of bread." In any case, though, the people have left the security of what they knew, even if it was slavery, and are faced with the unknown of new circumstances and seemingly little resources to sustain them. Even if Egypt wasn't

all they remembered it to be, Elim, which they have just left, had 12 springs of water and 70 palm trees (15:27), a paradise, compared to the desert.

All the people complain against Moses and Aaron, who assure the people that God has heard their cry, just as God had heard their groaning under slavery, and God will respond with bread from heaven. God's response to their complaining is to give them bread, manna which appears every morning when they wake up, and disappears once the sun grows hot. There is enough manna to feed everyone; everyone is satisfied. But this gift in the wilderness is not a gift that can be hoarded or stored, except on the sixth day.

In spite of the people's complaining, God responds with gift. In spite of their tendency to distrust God's word and try to hoard the manna from day to day, God continues to provide enough for them to eat. In spite of their doubting that on the seventh day, there would be no manna, God continues to preserve what they gather on the 6th day so it is available for their consumption on the 7th day.

While this isn't the first time the people, or even the reader of the text, have heard about the seventh day as a day of rest, it is the first time that the idea of preparing for the day of rest happens on the 6th day. This is likely the oldest OT passage about the Sabbath. (*Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Volume 5, p. 851) Teaching about the Sabbath included this idea that God created for 6 days, and rested on the 7th day; therefore the people of God should do likewise. Sabbath practice involved imitating God in this rhythm of work and rest. But in the wilderness, what was added was the preparation required on the 6th day in order to be ready for the day of rest. In order to be freed from labour, there was extra work to do on the 6th day.

While it may sound to us a bit like most of us experience before going on vacation—you work really hard to get all your work done, so you can go on vacation, and then you work really hard when you come back to catch up from being on vacation, and you wonder if there is a point to vacation, or even a benefit to it, if you have to get the same amount of work done, but in less time. Perhaps, that is what the 6th day felt like for the Israelites, collecting double the manna on the 6th day, in order to have enough for the 7th day. But that was not the point of the Sabbath, this 7th day of rest.

In many ways, this was a radical concept for the people who had been slaves and now found themselves experiencing the freedom of the wilderness. Whereas in Egypt they had been slaves and not at all in control of their lives, their work load, or their schedules, and most likely did not ever have a day off, here they were being given the gift, not only of food, but of rest. Under slavery, it was only the rulers who could enjoy a life of leisure; only those in power knew what it was not to work. Slaves did not know what it was to rest.

But here in the wilderness, when life seemed so overwhelming, and resources so limiting; when survival seemed like an hourly task; here in this place, they are given the gift of rest. The God who created the world in 6 days and rested on the 7th day, was instructing them in this same rhythm of work and rest, which itself was embedded into the very act of creation. In God's creation, God set the pattern of work and rest, not only for God, but for all people, and all living things.

This principle of work and rest appears a few chapters later in Exodus, and also in Deuteronomy, when the commandments are given, and the people are told to "remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy." And this principle is expanded on in both accounts: "Six days you shall labour and do all your work. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns." This Sabbath isn't just for their families, but for animals, foreigners, and slaves. Exodus and Deuteronomy differ in the reason behind this command, but this difference gives us a fuller picture of what Sabbath means. Exodus links this to creation: "For in 6 days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and consecrated it." (20:11) Deuteronomy links it to the Exodus: "Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day." (5:15)

Here we have 2 aspects of Sabbath: it is freedom from labour, and freedom from slavery. Sabbath is both grounded in creation and in liberation. In keeping Sabbath, the people imitate God and experience the freedom that comes from not having to produce and labour.

This story of manna in the wilderness, though, reminds us that keeping Sabbath is a practice in trust. In order to enjoy the rest from labour, the people have to trust that what God has provided on the previous day is enough for this day. Sabbath keeping in the wilderness is trust that God would provide and that their needs would be met each day, and particularly on this day when they are resting.

Keeping Sabbath is also tied to God's vision of shalom for all of creation. Since rest from work is commanded, not just for people, but for animals as well, Sabbath is fulfilled when all are given and receive the gift of rest. Shalom envisions a time when there is peace and wholeness for all creation; when justice and peace exist for all. Keeping Sabbath moves us closer to this shalom; it's a weekly glimpse of equality and rest for all.

I've heard a lot on the radio and have seen articles about how to keep ourselves well during this time of uncertainty; I even this week heard a rabbi say that the Jewish practice of Sabbath is a way of countering the need to respond to everything that is happening. This is a stressful time, and the feeling of needing to do something is a strong one. There is so much that clamours for our attention and our action.

Taking a Sabbath, a day to rest from our work, requires that we trust that the world and its people are in God's hands and under God's care. Ceasing our protests, resting from Facebook, news sites, social media notifications, for a day, requires us to trust that God is in control and that the world will go on without us. The gift of Sabbath is offered, not just to the Israelites wandering in the desert, but to 21st century people who find themselves in a new wilderness, one we didn't plan for nor expect. Our manna might look different—maybe it's not bread, but the gift of silence, a fast from news for a day, turning off what distracts us or causes our blood pressure to rise.

The gift of Sabbath was also a gift of liberation from what had enslaved the Israelites. This is also the gift offered to us. What enslaves each of us looks different, but Sabbath is receiving and living into the gift of liberation.

Keeping Sabbath is an exercise in resistance, as we refuse to be defined by the things of this world; as we resist the pressures that bombard us daily to conform to the world's standards of who we are to be. Christine Valters Paintner says that

“Sabbath keeping is an embodiment of our faith that there is something deeper at work in the world than the machinations of the power structure.” (*Illuminating the Way*, p. 137) To keep Sabbath, to let go, to cease from our labour for a day, is a declaration of trust in the God who holds us and our world, who is more powerful than the powers of this world. Sabbath reminds us that we are created in the image of God; that the God who created us invites us to trust that there is enough manna for today; that in our work and our rest, we are enough. Sabbath keeping turns our attention to God, rather than to the things of life that distract us from God.

For God after all, is the author and object of Sabbath. We aren't to keep Sabbath in order to take care of ourselves, or so that we will be more productive when we get back to work. The point of Sabbath is to direct our hearts and minds toward God, who is in control; who created this world and all that is in it; who is a God who liberates us from that which enslaves us. Sabbath keeping re-orient us each week to the One who holds us and our world, and reminds us that saving the world is not our job, but God's.

There is so much to do these days; so much clamouring for our attention and our action. As Christians, and particularly as Mennonites, we take seriously our call to be God's hands and feet in the world, participating with God in bringing about God's vision of shalom for all. In the midst of this call, comes God's invitation to rest, to let go of the need to produce, to act, to accomplish. In the midst of chaos, comes God's act of liberation from the things that enslave us.

We are invited to receive this gift of Sabbath; to trust that all will be well; to live into God's vision of Shalom for all. May it be so.