

June 10, 2012
Pentecost 2

"The Sabbath (Rest) Day"

DEUTERONOMY 5:12-15

Observe the Sabbath day by keeping it holy, as the LORD your God has commanded you. ¹³ Six days you shall labor and do all your work, ¹⁴ but the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your ox, your donkey or any of your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns, so that your male and female servants may rest, as you do. ¹⁵ 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.

My dad liked to take naps. As a child I was fascinated by how he woke up very early to milk the cows, ate breakfast and took a brief nap. Then after the noon meal he took another brief nap. It seems if he didn't get his naps he started to stress out. Norm Larson says that he takes his beauty rest ever afternoon and that is why he is so beautiful. You have heard of the "power nap." The children in preschool need their nap time or they become grouchy and irritable.

God wanted his Old Testament people to have a special nap time or rest time where they were free from the cares and worries of this life. He commanded them to set aside the seventh day as a Sabbath day or rest day. He wanted them to use this day to reflect on how much he loved and cared for them and provided for them. When they observed this Sabbath day they developed a wonderful rhythm in their lives where families were close to each other and close to the Lord.

The Third Commandment tells us, "Remember the Sabbath Day to keep it holy." The Lord wants us to build special moments in our lives when we can reflect on how much he loves us and how he has saved us from the damaging results of our sin. The *Small Catechism* says, "We should fear and love God that we do not despise preaching and his Word, but regard it as holy and gladly hear and learn it." The busier we get, the more we need the nap time or rest time in God's Word.

The time to reflect on God's love for us

The Lord knew that when his beloved people entered into the Promised Land flowing with milk and honey, they would become very busy people as they enjoyed the prosperity the Lord gave them. That is why he gave them the Sabbath day as a special day that they could set aside to reflect on his love for them. "Observe the Sabbath day by keeping it holy, as the Lord your God has commanded you. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God."

The Hebrew word used here for observing or keeping the Sabbath holy is first used in Genesis 2 where the Lord tells Adam and Eve they should work and care for the beautiful

Garden of Eden. What a joy it must have been to keep the Garden the Lord gave them. Every plant brought the joy of knowing how much God loved them and cared for them. Tending a garden takes work. You need to work up the soil, dig in some amendments, plant the seed, water the plants, pull out the weeds, and crush the snails. God's people planned their whole week so that they could have time off for the Sabbath. They were told by the Lord to get their work done in six days and then rest on the Sabbath. How richly the Lord blessed their labors when they made the Sabbath day the high point of their week.

The Lord made it clear that he did not want people thinking about work on that day: "On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your ox, your donkey, or any of your animals, nor the alien within your gates, so that manservant and maid servant may rest as you do." In another place the Lord told them not to light a fire on the Sabbath. That meant they could not gather sticks and light a fire to prepare a meal. What a blessing this rest day was for the physical bodies of the people, their servants and even their animals. More important than physical rest, this was a day to find the highest rest, the rest that we have in the Lord and his unfailing love for us.

At the time of Jesus, the super religious people missed the whole point of the Sabbath. They saw the command to not work as a way to try and earn God's love instead of just sitting back, relaxing and appreciating what the Lord did for them. In our Gospel for today we heard how the Pharisees criticized Jesus for picking some grain on the Sabbath and then rubbing it with his hands and eating it. Jesus told them, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath." The Lord made the Sabbath for people so they could use that day to celebrate what a great God they had. Just as we designate one day out of the year to celebrate the birthday of our country, the Lord designated one day a week for his people to celebrate how much he loved them and cared for them. Matthew's account includes Jesus saying, "If you had known what these words mean, 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice', you would not have condemned the innocent."

These words, "I will have mercy and sacrifice" sum up the main purpose of the Old Testament Sabbath as well as all the holy days and holy times we have set aside for ourselves. Why do we come to church? Why do we read the Bible? Why do we worship together? Do we do this to offer sacrifices to God to earn his favor? No we come together to celebrate God's mercy to us. What did the Old Testament people do on the Sabbath if there were no sports on television, no computer screens, no iPads, no video games, and no stores open for shopping? Oh, I am sure they enjoyed being together as a family, maybe they even played games. The main purpose of that day was to have a time when your God could come to you and overwhelm you with his unfailing mercy and love.

I am not overstating the case when I say that the most important word in the Old Testament beside the name of the Lord is the word "chesed" which is translated mercy. It carries with it the thought of unfailing love and loyalty. How can we ever exhaust the peace and comfort from the Bible verses we know that emphasize this mercy? "Goodness and mercy will follow us all the days of our life." "Your mercies are new to us every morning, great is your faithfulness." "O give thanks unto the Lord for he is good, for his mercy endures forever." The very name of God, Jehovah or Yahweh, has the thought of a God who is always the same, who will never change, who will always be there for you and keep

his promises.

This past week I had a conversation with a lady who has worshipped and held membership in numerous churches in this community. We were discussing how worship in the churches of this community is different from what it was in the past. She said she believes the heart and core of worship is what we offer God, not what our Lord offers us. She wants worship that gets her amped up and open to expressing her feelings toward God. When we come to worship we want to be led by the pastor and the congregation into seeing how God feels towards us. That will give us rest and then allow us to joyfully sing and speak about our feelings towards God.

As we take the time to reflect on God's mercy we are always overwhelmed at how faithful our God has been toward us. At the same time we become painfully aware of how often we have been unfaithful to him. Take a sample of any part of your life this past week and examine it closely and you become painfully aware that you have not loved the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind. Take another sample of a place where you interacted with people and you will discover you have not loved your neighbor as yourself. Satan has an uncanny way of leading us down the wrong path. All we can do is fall on our knees and plead for mercy, "Lord, have mercy on us. Christ has mercy on us." God is faithful. He is merciful. He assures us in Psalm 103, "For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him. As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us." Think of all the rest times the Lord has given you in your life. How many worship services have you attended. How many times have you been blessed by your reading of the Bible? How many times has Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to comfort you and remind you of his love?

The time to remember how the Lord has delivered us

The Lord also wanted his people to use the Sabbath day to recall all the times he rescued and delivered his people. "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." Can't you see the family gathered together on the Sabbath in their homes? Can't you hear them talking about great events from their past history, especially the time when the Lord rescued them when they were slaves in the land of Egypt. Children grew up with fond memories of their parents telling them the account of crossing the Red Sea. These were not just history lessons for God's people, they were HIS Story lessons as they told about Adam and Eve, and the promise that was given to Abraham. All these great deliverances from the past pointed to the great deliverer who was to come, Yishua, Jesus, the Messiah.

Jesus said that he was Lord of the Sabbath. New Testament Christians do not have to follow the laws that God gave his special people. Colossians 2 tells us, "Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come, the reality however is found in Christ." All the resting on the Sabbath and all the remembering and talk about deliverance was intended to point forward like a sign or shadow to the reality of what Jesus accomplished when he gave his life for us at the cross. Colossians 1 says, "But now you he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight without blemish and free from accusation."

In Christian freedom, early Christians chose the day on which Jesus rose from the dead as the time they wanted to gather together to find their peace and rest in him. They also set up certain holy days, or holidays when they might celebrate Jesus' birth, or his resurrection, or the coming of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. Some of the best Sabbath moments come when the Holy Spirit comes to and tells you, "Look at the peace and rest you have in Jesus." Jesus also invites you to find rest in him. "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 soul." The best moments in life are those when we reflect on God's mercy and remember how he has rescued us. Amen.