

Genesis 1-11

The Gift of the Sabbath

Chapter 1:31-2:3

July 16, 2006

A few years ago a newspaper carried the story of Tattoo the basset hound. Apparently, tattoo never wanted to go for an evening run, but then his owner shut his leash in the car door and took off for a drive. Tattoo was going for a run whether he liked it or not. Police officer Terry Filbert noticed a passing vehicle with something dragging behind it, “the basset hound picking them up and putting them down as fast as he could.” He chased the car to a stop and Tattoo was rescued, but not before the dog had reached a speed of 20 miles per hour, rolling over several times.

Now in case you’re worried, Tattoo is fine. But unfortunately, most of us live like Tattoo. Most social observers that we have become a nation of Tattoos – overworked, overstressed, overloaded, over-busy, and overloaded with choices, information, noise, technology and work. In his book called *Margin* family physician Dr. Richard Swenson said, “Something is wrong. People are tired and frazzled. People are anxious and depressed. People don’t have time to heal anymore. There is a psychic instability in our day that prevents peace from implanting itself firmly in the human spirit.”

Obviously, this is a complex social problem, but this morning God has good news for us. For thousands of years God has offered a wonderful, life-giving alternative to our frantic, overloaded lifestyle: it’s called the Sabbath. And as Jesus said in our Gospel reading, the Sabbath isn’t a religious law or a religious burden: it’s a gift given for us, a unique and startling new gift. In his book entitled *The Gift of the Jews*, author Thomas Cahill said, “No ancient society before the Jews had a day of rest ... the Sabbath is surely one of the simplest and sanest recommendations any god has ever made; and those who live without (it) are emptier and less resourceful.”

For the past few weeks we’ve been exploring the first chapter in the first book of the Bible. And throughout Genesis 1 we noticed a rhythm, a beat that starts with “And God said, ‘Let there be ... and it was so ... And there was evening and morning ...’” On the beat God creates; on the offbeat God pauses to enjoy His creation. All the days follow the same pattern. But now on the seventh day, the beat changes. On the 7th day of creation, we find a new word: finished – “God finished the work he had been doing.” Rather than just a little pause called night, the entire seventh day is one big pause. God rests. He doesn’t fret. The work is finished. God has no regrets, no anxiety and no pressure to do more work.

What is the Sabbath? It isn’t day off. It isn’t a time management technique. It isn’t a way to recharge our batteries so we can get more work done. Nor is the Sabbath a state of mind. I know many Christians who say, “O, yea, the Sabbath ... that’s for Old Testament, Jewish people. I keep the Sabbath – right between my ears. Or I keep the Sabbath deep in my heart. It’s a mental-spiritual state. You see, I’m spiritually mature

now so I don't need a Sabbath." Wow, congratulations! You've just become more spiritual than God! God took a Sabbath. That's what Genesis says (see Genesis 2:2). It wasn't a mental state; it was real rest. For us, the Sabbath is a certain day every week, i.e. one out of every seven days, which affects us physically, socially and spiritually.

Nor does the Sabbath equal "doing nothing." What did God do on the Sabbath? He saw all that he made. And then God delighted. He enjoyed it. He kicked back and said, "Ah, it's all good." And what should we do on the Sabbath? Find time to join God by delighting in creation, saying, "It's all good." God gives us an opportunity to experience delight.

The word Sabbath comes from the Hebrew word *sabat*, which means cease, quit, knock it off, take a break, cool your jets, slow down. Initially, it wasn't a "religious" word. It just meant "stop!" Now the word "stop" could be taken in two ways: (1) it could be a polite, value-free, emotionally-barren, soft-spoken voice that says, "Please stop" – along the lines of a voice you might hear at an airport. (2) It could be taken as a value-laden, emotionally-gripping voice that cries out, "STOP!!" as in "Would you just give it a rest for while." The Bible definitely puts the Sabbath in the second category. God gives us this command with emotion and intensity. Author Craig Barnes tells the story about a woman whose husband died instantly from a massive coronary while standing inside the church building. Shortly after his funeral, this woman saw a young couple having an argument right on the spot where her husband died. She just wanted to grab them both and say, "Stop! Just stop it! Don't waste your precious time together arguing. So stop arguing. The Sabbath comes with that level of emotional intensity. God says, "Stop it! Stop it right now!" The Sabbath is God's intense call for us to stop.

As you know this isn't the only time the gift of the Sabbath appears in the Bible. As a matter of fact, God seems to offer this gift over and over again. We keep saying, "Nah, I couldn't possibly take it." And God says, "No, really, God says, "Take it. Enjoy it." Let me give you two examples.

See Exodus 20:8-11. Notice a few things about this passage.

- First, it's part of the Ten Commandments. So Sabbath-keeping is not a suggestion or a recommendation; it definitely falls under the commandment category.
- Second, it's a really long commandment. Look at the three big commandments in verses 13-15 – "You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal." God has more to say about the Sabbath than murder, adultery and theft. Why is the third commandment about the Sabbath so long? Maybe God knew that we'd try to wiggle out of this one so He nailed it. For instance, I have rarely heard good church people brag about breaking the fifth commandment ("Yea, I murdered someone last night and it felt really good") or share their plans for breaking the sixth commandment ("hey, next week I won't be at small group because I'll be committing adultery"); but I've often heard Christians boast about their Sabbath-breaking ("I've been so busy working or serving the Lord that I haven't had a day off in a month").

- Third, notice the scope of this commandment: “You shall not do any work, neither you nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant nor your maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien in your gate.” That pretty much covers everything and everyone. Sorry, no exceptions.
- And then fourth, notice the reason: see verse 11. It points back to Genesis chapter 2: God worked six days – he worked very hard and creatively – but then he rested.

Next see also Deuteronomy 5:12-15. This portion retells the story of the Ten Commandments and basically repeats Exodus 20 but notice two things:

- First, it expands the command to let your animals rest by specifying oxen and donkeys. Give your donkey a rest! Personally, I feel really convicted by God that I should do something special for my dog Dwight today.
- Secondly, it adds one more reason for why we should keep the Sabbath – Read verse 15. God says, “Your ancestors worked 400 years without a day off and what good did it do them? They became slaves. They became cogs in the great wheel of productivity and efficiency. They were no longer free people. Their humanity was defaced.” In other words, don’t let that happen to you. Don’t be a slave to your job or to your yard or to your schedule.

So how do we live differently because of the Sabbath? What can I do to make the Sabbath meaningful? Let me end with ten really good things to do on the Sabbath:

1. Prepare for and enjoy worship by saying, “this is the day that the Lord has made! Let us be glad and rejoice in it!”
2. Take a nap.
3. Make something creative.
4. Invite people over for dinner.
5. Avoid the mall.
6. Enjoy creation. Delight as God delights.
7. Take a walk.
8. Write a letter or make a phone call but don’t check your work e-mail.
9. Find something that makes you laugh.
10. Go to a soccer game, but don’t yell at the officials or your kids; just talk to your neighbors.

Remember Jesus said that God gave us the gift of the Sabbath for our benefit. What are the benefits of the Sabbath? Let me just explore three this morning. We get to rest. The word itself also means “take a rest.” The Hebrew words for Sabbath, seven and rest all come from the same basic, root word.

Growing up in Minnesota, what do you think were the best days of the entire school year? Snow days! We’d go to bed at night and expect to wake up and trudge off to yet another day of school. And then we’d wake up and ... wait, can it be true, did I really hear those precious words from my mom’s lips? Yes, yes, yes – a Snow Day! The day was a total gift: no agenda, no to-do list because it’s a snow day. So what do we do on a snow day in Minnesota? First, I didn’t really know God, but I knew enough to be thankful so I said, “Yes, thank you God!” And then I’d pull the covers back over my

head and go to sleep. And then I'd wake up and eat. And then I'd call my friends from the neighborhood and go outside and play. And sometimes people who weren't my friends would come but I'd play with them anyway because, after all, it's a snow day and so we'd drop our grudges and abandon our cliques and just enjoy being together. And then I'd get hungry and eat some more food, especially my favorite lunch: bologna and pickle relish sandwiches with Campbell's bean with bacon soup. All day long there is no school bell, no watch, no homework, no to-do list – just friends, food, rest and fun.

Now what if God said, "Okay, gang, once a week – not just three times a year – but once a week, I'm going to give you a snow day experience?" The Bible claims that God has already done that: it's called Sabbath. God adds one more thing: the privilege of coming together to celebrate of gathering together for worship, singing and celebrating, bearing one another's burdens, sometimes crying out to God and offering our laments, always learning more about God by hearing His word in the Bible, and sometimes with the giving of the bread and cup in Communion. "But once a week," God says, "I want you – as a matter of fact, I'm ordering you – to rest, to take a nap, to eat bologna and pickle relish sandwiches (or something else that's really yummy and delicious), to hang out with friends, to drop your grudges, to forget about cliques, to welcome the stranger and the poor, to throw away your to-do list and your watch."

Now we shouldn't just say, "O, that's so cute. How sweet of God." The gift of the Sabbath is also the commandment of the Sabbath that proceeds from a Holy God who said that the Sabbath is holy. So why don't we do this more often? Why don't we open our hand and receive the gift of the Sabbath? It's pretty simple: we're stupid, disobedient creatures. I mean, I can rationalize it – I'm so busy, I'm so important, I have so much to do, my to-do list is just amazingly long, the Sabbath doesn't apply to me – but it just boils down to one thing: I don't care enough about what God thinks. I'll live my life my way.

Second, we get the gift of dispensability. Rather than trying to act like God I can start living under God's Fatherly care and mercy. You see, the Bible understands a "day" much different than we do. We begin our day with an alarm clock piercing the silence and the darkness. But in the Bible the day starts at night. And then when I wake up in the morning, what do I discover? Why, the day has already started without me. Somehow, God started the day all by Himself. Somehow, God has managed to keep the day going, holding it all together, without me as well. I had nothing to do with it. We went to sleep and God just kept on being God. We woke up and God was already on the job. We wake into a world we didn't make. So as the Sabbath rhythm works itself into my life, I discover something else: when I quit, the world doesn't quit. God doesn't quit. Jesus is still "sustaining all things by his powerful word" (Hebrews 1:3). God the Father is still the one who says, "I neither slumber nor sleep" (See Psalm 121).

The gift of dispensability says that the world can go on without me. Let's do an experiment: let's imagine that you are watching your own funeral. People gather outside the church with teary eyes and then they gather in the sanctuary. The minister gets up and does his thing – blah, blah, blah. Some people stand up and share some thoughts about your life. They sing a song, close the casket and go eat lunch. You're a little

miffed: how can they eat lunch at my funeral? Well, sorry, but they *are* hungry and those turkey and Swiss sandwiches do look very appetizing. Seriously, though, almost everyone is sad. Some people are very sad and they will remain sad for the rest of their lives. But here's the thing: the world continues without you. For the most part, i.e. for about 99.999% of the world, things keep turning and churning pretty much the same.

As you watch this scene you make a shocking discovery: you are not indispensable. You are not the Messiah. You are not God. Is this depressing? Well, initially it's certainly disappointing. It's nice to feel indispensable. People need you. The world can't get along very well without you and so you feel very special and important. But now all of that seems to be stripped away from me. But maybe it's actually freeing to realize that I don't have to fix everything, control everything, know everything.

The gift of dispensability removes so much pressure from my life. I'm convinced that much of the anxiety in our lives stems from a sense of our indispensability. The world can't make it without me. These people can't survive without me. God can't make it without my help. How can you live with that much pressure? No wonder you feel like you're falling apart! You were never made to be indispensable. The gift of the Sabbath helps you release the myth of indispensability. And on the Sabbath God says, "Just stop with the dispensability bit, okay. Let me take over. I can handle this one. You're just a little helper and I appreciate all that you do, but really, this is my job. You take break."

Third, I get to be loved. All through our lives we're scrambling for security, to be accepted, to avoid failure; we're scrambling to be loved and maintain love, scrambling to prove that we're worthy of love; we're scrambling for what the Bible calls righteousness – the state of being in right standing with God. So we produce. We accumulate. We prove. We work harder and longer. And, finally, we make it – but then we have to make it all over again.

And God says, "Look, I have a better way to live your life." And once a week – at least once a week – we get to hear God say, "I love you even when you're not productive. I love you even when you don't measure up. I love you when you have not achieved worthiness. I love you when you're sleeping. I love you when you're trying to worship. I love you when you're singing off-key. I love you when your life is screwed up and messed up and washed up and used up."

And this, my friends, leads us right into the heart of the Gospel. We see this whole idea of Sabbath rest and Sabbath spirituality pictured so beautifully at the cross of Jesus. Sabbath rest, the deep rest that comes from knowing that we are loved and accepted and embraced in spite of our performance, is pictured so beautifully at the cross. Because at the cross where Jesus died for us, we didn't and couldn't perform God's love. We were lost and in debt to our sin, but at the cross, God the Father found us and Jesus paid the price that freed us from our debt. Salvation itself is an act of Sabbath rest and delight in what God has done through Christ to save us. We grow in Christ by continuing to rest in God's grace for us in Christ. (See Philippians 3:8-9).