

Lent is the season of the Christian year, these 40 days plus Sundays before Easter, which is a time of self-examination and reflection. In the early church, Lent was a time to prepare new converts for baptism.

We are using the Fourth Commandment as our guide for this self-examination and reflection on our faith: “Remember the Sabbath to keep it holy”...H-O-L-Y.

Our sermon series and daily devotions have grown out of the idea of “keeping the Sabbath wholly”... W-H-O-L-L-Y; building on the themes of cease, rest, and today, embrace. Next week is ‘feast’.

I think we’re all familiar with the idea of ‘cease’ and ‘rest’ from the Fourth Commandment.

But today’s word, “embrace”, is not so familiar when we think of Sabbath.

Is it something like when Great Aunt Agnes comes over for Sunday dinner, we all get a big hug and scent of lavender behind her ears and peppermint on her breath to hide her cigarette smoking?

Or something like what we do when we pass the peace, except in flu season, a semi-embrace that’s a liturgical statement of welcome and forgiveness, but it’s usually with the same people because we’re always in the same place?

Or maybe something else?

My earliest memories of church are sitting with my grandfather and my parents, my aunts and grandmother in the choir; and the choir would stand, and the introit was always: “*God is in his holy temple, let all the earth keep silent before him.*”

But then, this man in a big black robe would stand up, start talking, and never shut up! There was a big disconnect!

What was said and what we did didn’t seem to go together. And as I grew older in the church, I saw that some people were welcome, some were not; some could be leaders, some because of their gender could not.

I heard a lot of people asking me if I was saved, and was given all sorts of rules of what I had to do to be saved.

I discovered that the way some people talked on Sunday was not the way they acted the rest of the week...a big disconnect!

I’m reminded of an old Dennis the Menace cartoon. Dennis is all polished and dressed up walking to the car and his friend Joey is standing off to the side.

Dennis says to Joey, “We’re going to church, Joey, but I’ll be myself again after lunch.”

And that brings us to the meaning of Sabbath embrace, as Marva Dawn says, “*By embracing God’s instructions in response to his immense grace and love, we choose to imitate God.*”

She goes on, “*The important point in all our imitation [of God] is its deliberate intentionality... To embrace is to accept with gusto, to live to the hilt, to choose with extra intentionality and tenacity.*”

No, Dennis, keeping the Sabbath means that we will never be ourselves again.

Let’s put it this way. Keeping the Sabbath, to cease and rest and embrace is a way to reset the defaults God created within us, to reorient our vision to God’s kingdom, and to find our place again in God’s house of prayer, to glorify and enjoy God.

Last week I offered the image of Sabbath as the front porch from which God says to you and me, “Come on up, rest a while, I want to enjoy your company.”

Sabbath embrace is about living in the house, this house of prayer, this house of healing, this house of hope.

Look at our passage from Isaiah that comes to the exiles coming back to the promised land, to live again in the home God gives them.

God could have said a lot of things about what you have to do to be saved, but what God says here in Isaiah is simple: Keep the Sabbath.

Now the New Testament says it this way, “Believe in Jesus Christ.” We’ll come back to that.

But first, here in Isaiah: “...*all who keep the sabbath and do not profane it, and hold fast my covenant, these I will bring to my holy mountain and make them joyful in house of prayer...*”

The foreigner says, “But the Bible (I looked it up in Deuteronomy) foreigners are to be walled out...”

And the eunuch says, “I looked it up in Deuteronomy, too...we’re not allowed in...”

And God says, “You have heard it said, but I’m giving a new word: neither ethnic origin or any purity identification shuts the door to my house.”

“Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy...” is an old word for new life, a generous welcome where God embraces us with gusto and tenacity to give us all salvation and deliverance, to bring us into God’s house of prayer.

A little bible study: you remember the story during Jesus’ last week where he overturned the tables in the temple. Remember what he said?

He quotes this verse from Isaiah: “*My house shall be called a house of prayer, (and then he says) but you have made it a den of robbers.*”

Can you feel the gusto and tenacity of Jesus’ keeping the Sabbath holy and out of the clutches of those who profane the Sabbath by stealing the sacred with their self-serving definition of salvation?

Now look at the story from Luke’s gospel...

Jesus heals a nameless woman on the Sabbath.

The rules were in place about ceasing and resting on the Sabbath so God would be glorified.

It would be easy to say that Jesus was doing the right thing, just in the wrong place at the wrong time, in the synagogue on the Sabbath.

In fact, the leader of the synagogue says, “We’re not against healing, just come back tomorrow. We’re closed today.”

But Jesus seems to suggest that Sabbath was sacred because it is more than a place and a time and this bent-over woman’s claim to the sacred is good any day of the week.

He called her “*a daughter of Abraham,*” a woman, a daughter of the promise of God, just as worthy as any of those men standing around in all their glory with their stingy hold on the sacred.

And he calls her to him...hadn’t he read Deuteronomy? She was unclean, to be avoided at all costs.

But Jesus touches her, an embrace that sets her free from her affliction, and in the words that are used, sets her free to enjoy life forever.

Or as Isaiah might say it, “Her salvation has come, her deliverance is revealed.”

And this is where we come back to what the New Testament says about salvation, “Believe in Jesus.”

Remember, in Isaiah, salvation comes with “keeping the Sabbath.” And what we see in Jesus is the great contrast between him and the religion of his time and place.

Jesus offers what the Sabbath day offers. Let me put it very plainly: Jesus, our salvation, is Sabbath.

Remember what he said, “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens...if you come to me, you will find everything that is to be contained in the Sabbath day: rest, refreshment, restoration, renewal!”

The Sabbath of Jesus is a life of love, not rules. It's a life of relationships, not regulations. It's a life of interactions, not institutions.

Jesus keeps Sabbath, as Isaiah said, with this woman in an embrace that is vulnerable, engaged, shared, and sacrificial.

Sabbath embrace is a call into a life-changing world, world-changing life to live in God's house of prayer that glorifies and enjoys God in the way Jesus lived the Sabbath, in the way Jesus is the Sabbath.

When we embrace the Sabbath of Jesus,

- we embrace a divided world with love,
- we embrace a sorrowful world with joy,
- we embrace a corrupt world with peace,
- we embrace an intolerant and vengeful world with divine patience,
- we embrace a cruel world with kindness,
- we embrace a self-centered world with generosity,
- we embrace an untrusting world with faithfulness,
- we embrace a hurtful world with gentleness,
- we embrace a world out of control with justice.

This is living the Sabbath that redeems, liberates, empowers, nurtures, refreshes, uplifts, heals, and saves.

God created us for this kind of living. Jesus calls us to follow him in this kind of living and showed us what it's like. And the Holy Spirit empowers and equips us for this kind of living.

And this is the kind of living that religion is supposed to nurture in us.

Any religion that does not call and nurture people into the life of love for all people cannot and will not lead people to glorify and enjoy God.

So, we must decide what kind of Sabbath we want to keep for God:

- Time for God? Yes.
- Time to cease and rest? Yes.
- Time to figure out who God is within our lives? Yes.
- Time to remember who our neighbor is? Yes.

Yes, now is the time, the day, the moment: “to embrace...to accept with gusto, to live to the hilt, to choose with extra intentionality and tenacity” the life and the love by which alone we can keep the Sabbath wholly holy.

TO GOD BE THE GLORY.