

As we come to the end of this sermon series for Lent, let me read from Marva Dawn’s book, “Keeping the Sabbath Wholly” (W-H-O-L-L-Y) from which we took our theme.

She summarizes the guide words we’ve followed for our Lenten journey through Sabbath: Cease, Rest, Embrace, and today, Feast.

She writes: “Observing the Sabbath includes not only the freedom from, and repentance for, work and worry (ceasing), the renewing of our whole being in grace-based faith (resting), and the intentionality of our choosing and valuing (embracing), but also the fun and festivity of a weekly...party” that emphasizes not only our present joy but also anticipates the future, eternal joy (feasting).

I’m the first to admit that ‘joy’ is not a word that readily comes to mind when we think of Lent.

I remember the first time I ever heard of Lent. L I was in the 8<sup>th</sup> Grade and Lent was not part of the Presbyterian life.

We had moved from Protestant majority north Louisiana closer to south Louisiana and more Catholics.

It was after basketball practice. A few of us would go to a little neighborhood market and have a candy bar and Coke while we waited for our parents to pick us up.

But on this day, my friend Doug Hebert, didn’t get anything. “Do you need some money?” “No, I gave up chocolate and soft drinks for Lent.” “You what? Lent, what’s that? You gave that up for how long? Why?”

As I ate my Snickers and drank my Coke, I was glad to be a Presbyterian!

But here we are, liturgical life has changed and we Presbyterians now observe the season of

Lent; and I’m still glad to be a Presbyterian because I know that Lent is not a time for being miserable.

These forty days and Sundays of Lent are a time for you and me to take stock, a time of self-examination, for resetting our life as a disciple of Jesus Christ.

As I said last week about 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, Sabbath feast.

Let’s go back and look again at the story in the second chapter of Genesis that is the source of the Fourth Commandment: “*And on the seventh day God finished the work ...and God rested from all the work...So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation.*”

I do not believe that God rested in the sense of taking a nap or chilling out. When God blessed and made the Sabbath holy, and the action word is ‘blessed’; that means to me that God was celebrating and delighting and rejoicing for all that had been created.

The great preacher, William Sloan Coffin, helps me here as he says about that first Sabbath: “With all that God had to celebrate, God threw a party for himself!”

If you think it is irreverent to think of God that way, just read the fifteenth chapter of Luke, and you’ll find: At the end of the parable of the lost sheep, when the one sheep was found, the shepherd threw a party; at the end of the parable of the lost coin, when the coin was found the woman threw a party; and at the end of the parable of the prodigal son, when the son was found, the father threw a party.

Look at Jesus himself, his first recorded miracle was performed at a what? A wedding banquet. The water was transformed into wine.

In scripture, food and drink are a symbol of God's generous blessing.

When Jesus' wanted to demonstrate God's compassion for the multitudes, he multiplied the loaves and fish for them.

So, according to Jesus, in his parables and in his life, God likes parties, celebrations, feasts, and, let me tell you this, it's dangerous theology to think you can improve on God.

Maybe we're just a little joy-impaired. We get so preoccupied with our responsibilities, so worried about the troubles of the day, so perfectionistic, so busy preparing for what's next that we have to be told more than once...

As Paul does, "Rejoice! And I'm telling you this a second time: Rejoice!"

And God, in Scripture, tells us not once, not twice, but about two hundred times: REJOICE!

G.K. Chesterton put it this way, "God has an infinite capacity for joy."

This is where I haven't been too glad about the Presbyterian uneasiness with the idea that God desires our joy.

The problem is not that we are too joyful, and God wants us to be more serious. The problem is that we are joy-deprived, and God wants us to dive deeper into his joy, "to taste and see that the Lord is good"...Sabbath feast.

Arthur Waskow, the director of the Shalom Center, says it this way: "Shabbat (Sabbath) is the time you stop doing. You study Torah (for us, study the Living Word), you sing, you dance, you celebrate, and you reflect on what the previous six days have been."

Or as the Native American spiritual rapper, Supaman, writes: "They say dance like nobody is watching. I think that implies we are afraid or ashamed to dance in front of the people. I say dance like everybody is watching. Dance like your children are watching, your ancestors, your family. Dance for those who are hurting, those who can't dance, those who lost loved ones and those who suffer injustices throughout the world. Let every prayer be a step for humanity! Most of all, dance for the Creator, who breathed into your soul so you may celebrate this gift of life!"

Yes, rejoice, and hear it again and again: Rejoice! Taste and see that the Lord is good! All our senses, our whole being created in the image of God to enjoy God's company and the blessing of God's creation.

God's Sabbath invitation, remember, to come up on the porch and rest awhile, and to come on in the house to embrace the Sabbath life with God and enjoy Sabbath feast.

When I was in seminary I received a student preaching assignment to a church in Alabama. The directions from Decatur, GA were: Go to Roanoke, AL and take Hwy. 431 South. At Buffalo Crossroads (If you get to Lafayette, you've gone too far) turn left, cross the railroad tracks, and take the right fork in the road. Follow that road until you come to a cemetery on the left and the church is on the right!

In other words, beyond the middle of nowhere!

We pulled up about 15 minutes before the service and no one was there. This church only met twice a month...had I gotten my dates mixed up...but then, there suddenly appeared about 8 to 10 cars and trucks in front of the church.

My wife and I were standing outside after the service, and the custom for most of these rural churches was either to invite you to lunch or give you a little lunch money.

And just as suddenly as the vehicles appeared they disappeared, except for one car...an elderly couple, he was on a walker and she had her cane.

She got him in the car and just before getting behind the wheel, said, “Y’all are welcome to come home with us if you want a little bite to eat.”

As we followed them deeper into the Alabama wilderness, I told my wife that a ‘little bite’ ought to hold us until we got back to civilization.

We walked into their kitchen. She pulled a tablecloth off the kitchen table and revealed a table set for four. She proceeded to serve us and didn’t sit down until we were on our second helping of ham and 3 or 4 vegetables, rice and gravy, cornbread.

As we waddled out to the car to return home, she told us to wait a minute; went back in and came out with a paper bag, saying, “You might want this if you get hungry on the way home.” In it were a dozen home-made fried apple and peach pies!

The invitation for a ‘little bite to eat’ was for more than we ever expected, more than what could have hoped for!

I think there are a lot of people who are driving around and around in their lives day after day, week after week, finding themselves in the middle of their own nowhere; wondering how and where they can find nourishment for a soul starving for peace.

And here we are, the people of Sabbath blessing, the alternative to the demanding, clamoring, pervasive preference to forge ahead on our own.

We have a table set, ready to serve the soul-restoring peace of Sabbath life: whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable, anything that is excellent or praiseworthy.

Keeping the Sabbath wholly holy is how we can extend an invitation to the world to come with us and be filled with more than they could ever hope for.

Keeping Sabbath delivers us from discouragement over the way the world goes, keeps us from losing faith when things go badly, when values seem lost, when virtues seem irrelevant.

Sabbath is a gift from God, as Paul said, “...a peace that passes all understanding.”

Listen again to Marva Dawn: “When the Sabbath is finally fulfilled, our divisions and weakness will *cease* forever. We will *rest* eternally in God’s grace and love. We will *embrace* his kingdom and sovereignty ultimately and perfectly. We will *feast* unceasingly in his presence.”

Because keeping the Sabbath is remembering, remembering where we’ve been and how it was and remembering God’s spirit of creation that moves within us to make all things new, remembering the grace and courage of Christ with us to live as a new creation...to remember the Sabbath and keep it holy, H-O-L-Y, is to live the blessing that God remembers us and keeps us wholly, W-H-O-L-L-Y.

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and keep it holy,  
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TO GOD BE THE GLORY.