

**Concerning Sabbath**  
Jubilee Mennonite Church  
June 2, 2019

**Purpose:** To recall the roots and the reasons for Sabbath keeping.

**Message:** As people of hope and living in God's hands, Sabbath is important that we remember where it is that we rest.

**Scripture:** Primary Text: Exodus 16:22-36 (I will read), Matthew 12:1-14 [please read]

**Synopsis:** Sabbath rest, in its form as a regular calendar event, observed occurrence is a bit of a ab-normality to us. We know it as a commandment, and perhaps a reason that the state might restrict sales from time to time, but in terms of observing Sabbath, a time set apart for rest and the reliance on God. We are invited to Sabbath not so much as an obligation of observation by mandate in order to be holy, but to remind us that God provides us what we need when we need it. Like Israel of old in the desert, we are invited to trust God's adequacy to supply our needs beyond what might be typical or logical.

**Exodus 16:22 - 17:1** <sup>22</sup> On the sixth day, they gathered twice as much-- two omers for each person-- and the leaders of the community came and reported this to Moses. <sup>23</sup> He said to them, "This is what the LORD commanded: 'Tomorrow is to be a day of rest, a holy Sabbath to the LORD. So bake what you want to bake and boil what you want to boil. Save whatever is left and keep it until morning.'" <sup>24</sup> So they saved it until morning, as Moses commanded, and it did not stink or get maggots in it. <sup>25</sup> "Eat it today," Moses said, "because today is a Sabbath to the LORD. You will not find any of it on the ground today. <sup>26</sup> Six days you are to gather it, but on the seventh day, the Sabbath, there will not be any." <sup>27</sup> Nevertheless, some of the people went out on the seventh day to gather it, but they found none. <sup>28</sup> Then the LORD said to Moses, "How long will you refuse to keep my commands and my instructions? <sup>29</sup> Bear in mind that the LORD has given you the Sabbath; that is why on the sixth day he gives you bread for two days. Everyone is to stay where he is on the seventh day; no one is to go out." <sup>30</sup> So the people rested on the seventh day. <sup>31</sup> The people of Israel called the bread manna. It was white like coriander seed and tasted like wafers made with honey. <sup>32</sup> Moses said, "This is what the LORD has commanded: 'Take an omer of manna and keep it for the generations to come, so they can see the bread I gave you to eat in the desert when I brought you out of Egypt.'" <sup>33</sup> So Moses said to Aaron, "Take a jar and put an omer of manna in it. Then place it before the LORD to be kept for the generations to come." <sup>34</sup> As the LORD commanded Moses, Aaron put the manna in front of the Testimony, that it might be kept. <sup>35</sup> The Israelites ate manna forty years, until they came to a land that was settled; they ate manna until they reached the border of Canaan. <sup>36</sup> (An omer is one tenth of an ephah.)

**Exodus 16:22 - 36**

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Sometimes we don't know what to do with what is given us. Earlier this week, I was asked what I was speaking on this Sunday by someone who shall remain namesless. 'Sabbath' says I. Her reply? Incredibly amused laughter. Sabbath? A real knee slapper. It just struck her funny that this would be my topic. Both because of all weeks ever, sabbath was not very high on our priority list. Our house went on the market this week, and that candle that we have been burning regularly on both ends just caught lite in the middle. We made it, but only by the graciousness of friends, and many of you. Besides, talking about sabbath keeping sounds out of place and time—more than a bit funny. And that is OK. After all I am here to entertain, though you should be fairly warned when you laugh a preacher, you may just turned into a sermon illustration. Fictional wizards can transfigure you into a toad; we preachers are stuck with illustrations. Not quite as glamorous or terrifying, I'll grant you, but a power all the same. What was so funny after all? Sabbath seems like a perfectly logical and important thing talk about. It is one of the classics—even has its very own commandment, so it is rather important. Yet it is the one that we keep most completely silent about (when was the last time anyone inquired how your sabbath keeping was progressing)? I will readily admit I personally am not be the best example of Sabbath keeping in the world (and there is nothing quite as funny as a healthy dose of irony), but still, really, what is so funny about Sabbath?

Maybe it's just that it sounds so quaint. Sabbath observation seems like something that has gone the way of men wearing fedoras and women sporting white elbow gloves. The time of Sabbath is a thing of the past, full of strict rules of thou shall nots and stiff collars of exactly what is in and what is out. I remember the furor in the small town I lived in when the grocery store began a 7 day schedule, and the wringing of hands it introduced, wondering what it would mean for the world. Now to see a closed sign on any retail store during any daylight hours, feels to people like an inconvenience beyond logic. I personally find Manitoba's curfew on Sunday retail sales a bit odd, I must admit. Pleasant, so far as it goes, but odd. Our world, our empire, demands productivity be the highest goal of all as we are more and more connected to our work no matter what time it may be. You have to make quotas, you have to be efficient, you have to out-compete or risk falling behind. Failing to answer an text or email for more than an hour or two is all but an unpardonable offense. Our world is a 24 hour, constant cycle, rolling on without notice of time, day or season, demanding more and more. In many ways, we have become slaves to our world and our work, and the technology that we use to manage it.

All of which is not too dissimilar to our friends the Israelites out there in the desert. They had their quotas, their bricks to be made, and how fast. Your time was not your own. They had to keep performing, or risk the consequences—after all being let go in those days was not nearly as clean as our pink slips. If you did what was required, you got fed. If not, well not. It was slavery, but it was a way of life, where freedom was not to be conceived of, but as with people no matter what the age, you do what needs to be done to put bread on the table.

So you would think that freedom would be great. They had just made the leap and were saved by the closing of the Red Sea behind them. They are out in the wilderness, away from it all, and in charge of their own destiny. Nobody telling you what to do. No more advertisers suggesting that if you could just buy one more thing, your life would be better. No one demanding more overtime. It seems ideal. Except for one little thing: it freaks them out. How are we going to be fed? Almost as immediately as the people had been brought across the red sea to freedom they started complaining. We might not have like the empire, but we at least knew that we were going to be fed. *"If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill the whole assembly with hunger."*<sup>1</sup> In leaving the empire of Egypt thought they had been brought to the wilderness, the empty barren waste to die. But instead they saw the Glory of God. In response to the people's complaints, God comes to them and gives them quail at night and this bread in the morning. This bread was unlike anything they had ever seen before, so they named it Manna; literally in Hebrew 'what is it'. They went into the space, out of the expectations of how things are and how things should be, and they were met there not only with provision but the very glory of God itself.

Ultimately, this is a story about Sabbath. Though we are not keyed to see it. Usually we see Sabbath as an obligation, another must of what we must do and how we must behave. Another demand of an angry God or angry parents: take your pick. We adopt an attitude that Sabbath is a punishing time, a time where we HAVE to follow the rules, or else. It is a giant time out, and we are the naughty children. I am sure we can all sit around and swap stories either from our childhoods or those of our parents of the laws and regulations that Sabbath is often most readily associated with. But that is not what it is, really. Sabbath is wilderness time. It is time to withdrawal, to get off the hamster wheel that we so often feel we live on, and walk away from the assumptions of empire and its demands on life, and to see what is provided us in the

space in between. Sabbath is meant to be a gift, not a burden. It's a time for play. It's a time for joy. Historically, Sabbath was recommended by rabbis as the ideal time for couples to make love. It is time to open ourselves to the possibility of the bread we most need being provided us, not by our own ingenuity and effort, but by the hand of the one who meets us in wilderness. Sabbath is God's good gift of time, of play, and provision of all that we need, reminding us that the world in which we reside, and the rules by which we normally play is not, ultimately, our lives fully lived, nor our responsibilities fully realized.

My senior year of High School, the town I lived in was struck with an odd disaster of sorts. My hometown is a public power town, providing its own energy from a plant on the north end of town. But one night, in my busiest portion of the year, the power plant had a fire right where the plant tied in to the rest of the national grid. We were in the dark and cold for almost 5 days. At that time, I was responsible to get the yearbook to the publisher, finish a number of papers, and any number of other all important tasks. Even back then, to not have power was not to be able to work. So it was rather nerve racking to be struck with being thrust back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century for the foreseeable future. But what opened up in this time was a remarkable scene. Despite being early spring and still quite cold, you could see people out on the back porch enjoying an early Barbeque and each other (it was February in Ohio). I was able to connect with my neighbors and friends in ways that I could not, had not, in any other way. Even when we went to the next town with power, we were able to connect with people from our town as we leaned from table to table, trading stories, the news of the disaster and when it might be fixed. In the wilderness of being disconnected from life more ordinary, we were able to get in touch with the far more extraordinary opportunity to connect with friends in a way that was never before capable. In short, we were dropped into the wilderness, and we were fed with a bounty that we never expected.

So it is with Sabbath keeping. The purpose of Sabbath keeping is to purposefully, intentionally, giving us a different quality of time. Its about allowing ourselves to rest away from the fear that there will never be enough: of us, of our abilities, of stuff to go around, of God to provide what we need. The invitation of Sabbath is to taking the opportunity to receive the gift of God's provision, a provision that is adequate enough to meet us where we are at, and to do so as a regular practice of hopefulness and openness. But it won't be done for us. We no longer have the societal supports to force us to it. The days of the closed retail culture and socially mandated

rest period are dead on gone. It takes an active boundary that needs to be maintained to intentionally take this time and make it into what it is called to be, how ever we find to take that. We value our ability to exceed our own boundaries to make things happen (like carpet cleaning at 3 in the morning). Our story from Exodus is full of boundaries. Gather only so much, about 3.5 liters/person/day five days and gather twice as much on the sixth. The consequence of not maintaining those boundaries? It bread worms, and stink and chaos. In a phrase, without boundaries, life stinks.

Sabbath keeping is about much more than purity and self-righteousness. Its about taking a break from that which is normal, that which is anxiety building, that which is stressful. Maybe our Sabbath ritual today is to refrain from the news just for a day, and allow ourselves to luxuriate in not worrying about the world, just for a while. Maybe it is a time to take a break from the technology that is continuously keeping us in touch, and placing ourselves on a 24 hour plane ride—out of touch and off the grid. Maybe it is a Sabbath from the shaping images of empire that would have us buy, consume, and dispose, and relieve ourselves from the space that this occupies in our lives. What ever it is, we need to observe Sabbath, and take to ourselves the alternative order of the day when we can allow space for God’s spirit to speak to us, to move within us, and activate us for new life coming out of wilderness.

Sabbath is one of those disciplines that we can only draw a correlation of appreciation to when we know we have missed it, when we know that we need it. I will tell you right now that I need this sermon as much, if not more, than any of you. I need sabbath; I need to rest in God, because I know but one thing about the next 10 weeks and beyond: I haven’t the strength of my own to make it through it. For that I am rely on God’s provision, and I want to relax into that and trust that.

We are invited to rest in God, in God’s good work, and in the reality that ours is a world of enough, that we are enough for. May we find ways to live into that promise that we might have the abundance of life we are promised. Amen.

## **NOTES**

<http://www.practicingourfaith.org/cfm/library/view.cfm?id=407&page=1&practice=5>

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<sup>1</sup> Exo 16:2

