



Sermon for Nineteenth Sunday After Pentecost, Oct. 8, 2023

St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Coeur d'Alene

Kay Lockhart

Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20; Psalm 19; Philippians 3:4b-14; Matthew 21:33-46

This week, the lectionary continues to guide us on a journey through Exodus. Moses is on Mt. Sinai, and in our Exodus reading today we hear God hand down what we've termed "The Ten Commandments." But if you look closely, the text doesn't refer to them as commandments, but simply as "words" from God. We've had a tendency in our Western Christian culture to view these words as prescriptive – God says do these *or else*. But I would like to encourage us to shift our thinking to see these simply as words of wisdom from a loving God who wants good things for us. They were and are guidance for building the Kingdom. I think this will help us as we look at the "rules" listed here, and the hundreds more in the remainder of the Torah, to be able to examine if these are still wisdom in our own place and context.

So let's keep that in mind as we look deeper today at the third precept listed here: "Remember the Sabbath Day, and keep it holy."

Now today, we're also honoring St. Francis, whose feast day was this week.

(I promise I am going to tie this back into Sabbath, so bear with me for a minute as I take this wordy stroll.)

There's an old story about St. Francis. Perhaps many of you have heard it before. The story goes that St. Francis was tending to his garden, when he was approached by a follower and asked "If you knew God was returning tomorrow, what would you do?" St. Francis replied, simply "I would keep hoeing."

I don't know if this story is literally true or not, but it encapsulates so much of my love of St. Francis in one tale: his simplicity, his earnestness, his humility. But ultimately, I think this is a story about how Francis viewed the role of the earth in God's Kingdom. Through this simple statement, Francis is putting care for the earth as something God would be pleased with his working the ground. I would argue that he's saying that God would be just as proud as if he were found tending to humans. Care of humans is in fact tied in with care of the earth, and Francis treated both as equally sacred.

If there's one thing nearly everyone knows about St. Francis, it was his love for animals and the earth. But this goes deeper than simply seeing the earth as something worthy of notice. He saw care for the entirety of creation as being integral to God's Kingdom. In other words, we as humans don't exist as something separate from the rest of creation. God didn't declare only humans as good in the creation story – he declared ALL of creation good, humans no more so than anything else. The same Hebrew word, טוב (tov), is used in Genesis to describe God's reaction to the creation of light, the earth and sea, the air, the plants, living creatures, and humans. The same word, each time. And all of creation together? Declared טוב מְאֹד ("meh-ode-tov.") Very good.

And what did God do after seeing it was good? He rested in that goodness. The seventh day is not simply “rest,” it is a time to recognize the fullness of creation as it was meant to be.

You may have heard the Hebrew word שלום (“Shalom”) before. It is used as a greeting, and we’ve typically translated it in the Bible as “peace.” I would call this a mistranslation, but there’s also not a better word to put in its place, because we do not have a similar concept in English. It means fullness, completeness, everything as it is supposed to be, in line with God and with each other. When Jesus says “Peace I leave you, my peace I give you,” he is using the word “shalom.” I give you the fullness of everything as it was meant to be, as God created it, as God meant it. Shalom is an offering and a promise.

Perhaps you’ve also heard the Hebrew phrase שבת שלום (“Shabbat Shalom.”) Shabbat is Sabbath, and this Hebrew phrase indicates the Jewish heart for Sabbath: for the fullness of God’s Kingdom as exercised through the Sabbath. This goes beyond simply resting. It is practicing living in God’s Kingdom. Our Exodus reading begins with this line: “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the house of Slavery.” This is the heart with which God lays out his wisdom for us. God says to us, “You are not slaves. You are free. And from that freedom, I invite you to true Shalom.” And likewise, as we hear in today’s Gospel readings, Jesus tells us “Come to me, all you who are laden and heavy burdened, and I will give you rest.”

From the place of freedom, God invites us to Sabbath. “Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy.” Again, this is not an angry God demanding that you do no work lest you be punished. I want you to hear this as an invitation from God: I have done the work, and we have done work together, now rest in it with me. And what was that initial rest of God’s in Genesis? It was an appreciation of all of God’s own creation, unified together as it was meant to be.

Six days a week, it is our job to be building that Kingdom with God. God gives us tasks to do – the rest of our Exodus passage today are full of wisdom on how to get back to that Kingdom, back to Shalom as it was intended. As is Jesus’ distillation of it in “love your God and love each other.” This is the true wisdom that God gives us towards Shalom. So for the rest of the week, it is our job to tend to creation as St. Francis saw so necessary. This earth is the one we’ve been given. It is our gift. And it was made for so much more than what we’re doing with it now.

This idea is extended even further through the Jewish practice of Jubilee. Jubilee is a very large concept, so I’m not going to get into all the details of it right now, but basically every 7th year in the Jewish calendar was marked as a year of rest and return to God. Mirroring the rule of 7s in the creation story, the 7th year was a chance to reset, to rethink priorities and realign with the vision for Shalom. And one piece of that seventh Jubilee year was the call for the land to rest. For 6 years, Israelites were called to work the land, but on the seventh the land was allowed a rest and a reset.

What I find most fascinating about this is that it actually makes sense from a scientific perspective. God was passing down a “law” - if you want to use that language - that was simply in line with good crop maintenance. As any farmer can tell you, if you continue to put the same crop in the same land year after year, eventually you’ll destroy the richness of the soil and it will not bear fruit. This

“commandment” given to the Israelites was in fact wisdom on how to treat our earth as it needs to be treated. Yes, it bears fruit for us. But it needs rest too. And we should take that rest time to appreciate what it has offered us, to include it in our vision for shalom.

So I am inviting us today, on this Sabbath day and feast of St. Francis, on our pet dedication day, to both rest in the joy of God’s creation, and to accept the promise of Christ for Shalom and for a release of our burdens. And what better way to honor creation, to accept that joy, and to lean into rest, than to bless the pets that encapsulate all of this for us. God’s plan includes all of creation. It is not complete without the fullness of the earth and all the creatures within.

So let us bless them together, giving God thanks for their place in creation, and in our lives. Shabbat Shalom.