

Sabbath as Way
Hebrews 4.1-16
Deuteronomy 5.6-21, Psalm 139.1-6, 13-18
June 17, 2018
Pentecost +4B

Maybe today is just a statement and not a sermon; a collection of evolving thoughts and passionate ramblings rather than a tidy summation of things. I need to be in Hebrews for my own personal study and professional writing, and so we enter the third of ten sermons from this old, old sermon today. However, when there is crisis in the moment of today, I can't bring myself to go all in on a passage of scripture simply because it was scheduled to be used today. And this particular passage of scripture carries some interpretive challenges of its own as, at first glance, it appears to be supplanting one group's religious heritage with another's.

Let's talk about interpreting the Bible. We know we cannot simply open the Bible to a passage, read its words, and make sense of them as we find them in 21st century English on a printed page. We will hold open this Hebrews 4 passage, particularly the repetition of rest and sabbath, in one hand while in the other we hold Deuteronomy 5. To understand rightly, we have to follow the threads that connect one passage to another (and even better when we keep following beyond to another and another.) One cannot simply quote Romans 13 aloud, without context or interpretation, to justify immoral and inhumane political oppression. We're not going to do that here.

Our friend through Together for Hope in Lake Providence, the Rev. Dr. Marc Boswell, had these words to share yesterday about the abusive, out-of-context reading of already problematic scripture:

"The Bible - both Hebrew and Christian Scriptures - says some really harsh and ugly things. Its pages often display the vindictive and vengeful fantasies of some of its writers. Non-Israelite men, women, and children are slaughtered - and its justified. Non-Christians get obliterated in Revelation dreams of apocalyptic destruction. Genocide is blessed. Slavery is condoned.

This is the sacred text we've inherited. It's deeply beautiful, at times, and also deeply flawed. And most of us know it.

It seems, though, that conservative methods of reading the Bible have won the day. We liberals get sucked into debates about what's 'biblical' and what's not. We can't

resist the game of who's reading the right passages in the right ways with the right emphasis on the right moral nuance.

This is for good reason, especially as lives are on the line, as we currently see at the border and in immigration facilities.

Nevertheless, we accept the rules of the game as it's been established for us by those who wish to use it to bless xenophobias of all sorts. I'm not at all convinced that we'll ever win this game.

Perhaps, though, winning the day isn't something to realistically be expected. Perhaps vigilance and persistence in liberative readings is the most we can hope for as long as we continue to make this text central to our lives of faith."

How do we make sense of the text central to our lives of faith? In Hebrews 4 we hear repeated phrases about Sabbath rest, particularly who is entering and not entering that rest. The experience of Sabbath here is intimately linked to the experience of Christ, and the Jesus Way is enhancing Sabbath.

It feels selfish to rest right now. Selfish to stop working, stop advocating, stop connecting. Is that the kind of ceasing we're to consider? To get to an understanding of how true Sabbath is linked to the identity of Christ and the activity of God, we have to look beyond Hebrews. Sabbath isn't just about rest, and the Hebrews Preacher means a soul rest with some eternal depth. This isn't a biblical mandate for a great night's sleep. Sabbath is about a deep, soul-centering on a regular basis that draws you back into truest self.

The Hebrews Preacher does seem focused on the ones who will "not enter my rest," and this is where we need to be especially careful about using sacred texts to shut out a people called by God. It seems that's what people like to do with scripture; particularly people in power. We don't want to be abusers of sacred text, we want to be students of holy words. If the preacher is not saying that one group is superior to the other group because of their belief in Jesus, then what is he saying?

The Preacher is talking to people who aren't completely sold on the Jesus story, or the presence of God, or the movement of the Spirit. They aren't all in on the Jesus Way. They are conflicted about the power and comfort they find in society. They are more drawn to the culture around them than the Jesus path. In this part of the sermon, the Preacher's talking about forgetting and remembering. That's an old, old theme. And

when we talk about remembering and Sabbath, there are many threads we can follow across the biblical canon. Right now, let's follow the one to Deuteronomy 5.

What happens in Deuteronomy? "Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy, as the Lord your God commanded you. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God"

And why? "Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day."

Luther Seminary's Rolf Jacobson calls Sabbath, "Oppression interrupted."¹ In Genesis 3 we read a story of work linked to humanity's separation from God. Jacobsen notes, "God ordained that the oppressive reality of having to work 'all the days of your life' would be graciously interrupted, one day in every seven."

Sabbath as oppression interrupted is about the restoration of the one who is resting but also about shocking the system that the interruption of oppression is where real life happens. Best life, truest life, God imagined life is the interruption and ultimate ending of oppression. And Sabbath is a glimpse of that vision.

The Hebrews Preacher is calling his audience to be followers of the Sabbath Way. To remember who they are. To give a testimony with their lives about what it is they really believe.

As we move to the end of Hebrews chapter 4, Amy L.B. Peeler notes, "We, he reminds his audience, are a part of this creation, so we are poised under God's searching word. We will have to give an account of our lives and our hearts. The author has created a multifaceted picture with his use of the term *logos*. The 'word' of God is living and active -- terrifying, in fact -- and to this *logos*, all creation, including the author and his congregation, will have to render a *logos*, an account.

Hence, the author of Hebrews seems not to be employing a Johannine *Logos*." John's Gospel, of course, begins with "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was God and the Word was with God." Same Greek *logos* but different implementation happening in Hebrews.

¹ http://digitalcommons.luthersem.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1108&context=faculty_articles

"[The Preacher] never, in fact, personifies the *logos* as equated with Christ. Instead, most often, *logos* is that which God speaks (Hebrews 2:2; 4:2; 5:13; 7:28; 12:19; 13:7, 17) and here the speech of God is so active that it is able to expose and see all things. He intends his discussion of the word of God to create sobriety. God is speaking to us (1:2); therefore are we ready to stand before his exacting and exposing word? What is the state of our hearts?" Before we can panic about the state of our hearts, "the author throws them a rope. Grasp this, he says: our confession. What have they confessed?

...Their confession of [Christ] transforms their stance before God. Whereas fear would be expected, now they can come in boldness. They approach the same living and active God, but now they also know his throne is one of grace. The God who knows all about them, who could demand their lives, gives mercy, favor, and help right when it is needed."²

Sabbath is an essential rhythm to the life of faith for it calls us to remember, shakes us out of the patterns and habits of our culture and our world, and Sabbath calls us to live in radical, particular ways because it is rooted in remembering oppression and interrupting those broken ways forever. Then for the Hebrews Preacher, Sabbath is linked to our LOGOS; our personal life word. What is the story we are telling with our lives? How are we rooted in the Christ? How are we embodying lives as oppression interrupters? How are we giving ourselves and our words to this Way?

Clearly, I am a word person. I say in 100 what could probably said in 25. I play in phrases and delight in the beauty of a metaphor. My word of faith right now is swirling from this place of being an oppression interrupter.

In the present moment of crisis at our southern border; as some 2000 children have been separated from their parents; as faith leaders are gathering and mobilizing; as we are determining next steps, direct action, and public protest, I have crafted a statement which has now been signed by 40 local clergy—Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, Quaker, Zen Buddhist, Unitarian Universalist. We are meeting this week to spread these words more broadly across our city and to talk about how our words will be linked to next steps, public action, and interrupting oppression.

² http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2653

12 June 2018

A call to welcome from faith leaders of New Orleans.

As leaders of faith communities, we walk with families every day through joy and suffering. The joys are certainly easier to bear than the struggles, but our task is to be present in both as we hold sacred space and offer words of peace, hope, love, and kindness. We do not simply embrace what is easy and ignore what is difficult as our task is not that of keeping peace. After all, our work is not just living out faith on behalf of our people but calling on our congregations to embody their faith traditions in the large and small moments of life. We tell our sacred stories again and again in hopes that we are being shaped and formed for our world that we might work together toward its healing.

It is time for faith leaders of all traditions to stand together with prophetic challenge for our people in the face of immoral actions being made by the leaders of our nation. Now is the time for faith leaders of all backgrounds and traditions to stand together in a moral moment facing the nation we call home.

We reject the inhumane treatment of separating migrant families at the United States borders. We reject the isolation and terror being inflicted on vulnerable children. We reject the trauma being added to already traumatized families who are fleeing danger, persecution, violence, and despair. We reject the political strategy of false narrative that speaks of migrants as animals and children as dangerous. We reject these practices coming from the highest offices of power, even if these practices are legal. We call on people of faith to stand together in the face of hate and fear-mongering with a message of love. We call on people of faith to contact state and federal political leaders to speak sincerely as one's sacred stories inspire—of holy welcome and radical hospitality, of human beings made in the Divine image, of integrity, hope, and loving kindness.

In this moment, we will stand as people of all faith traditions and no faith traditions, as neighbors and parents and friends and citizens, to grab the moral arc of the universe with a lasso and bend that thing toward justice. We will welcome deeply without classifications of worthy or unworthy. We will love because love is our command. We will take prophetic action, rooted in the ancient traditions of our faith communities. We will stand together in the face of corrupt power to protect and welcome the strangers in our midst.

Rev. Elizabeth Mangham Lott, St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church

Rev. Darcy Roake, Community Church Unitarian Universalist
Rev. Buddy Noel, Ecumenical and Interreligious Office, Archdiocese of New Orleans
Rev. Callie Winn Crawford, United Methodist Church
Rev. Sarah Chancellor-Watson, St. Charles Avenue Presbyterian Church
Rev. Shawn Anglim, First Grace UMC
Rev. William Thiele, School for Contemplative Living, Quaker
Dr. Minka Shura Sprague, Episcopal Diocese of Louisiana
Rev. Dr. Jay Hogewood, Rayne Memorial UMC
Rabbi Matthew Reimer, Temple Sinai
Rabbi Edward Paul Cohn, Temple Sinai
Sister Alison McCrary, SFCC
Rev. Juanita Ramos, First Grace United Methodist Church
Rev. Oscar Ramos, One Love United Methodist Church
Rev. Dr. Cory Sparks, St. Mark's UMC
Rev. Fred Kammer, S.J., Executive Director, Jesuit Social Research Institute/Loyola
University New Orleans
Rev. Susan Lassalle, United Church of Christ
Rev. Michaela O'Connor Bono, Mid City Zen Buddhist Community
Rev. Rachel Ringlaben, Misión Luterana Mesa Abierta (ELCA)
Clarita Bourque, MSC
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Nancy Hale, CHF
Pauline O'Reilly, CHF
Janine Beniger, MSC
Joyce Hanks, MSC
Joanne Ladwig, SCC
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