

Sermon – Move Slow and Fix Things

Scripture Texts

- Deuteronomy 5:12-15
- Exodus 1:8-14
- Exodus 5:6-9
- Matthew 6:25-34

Transcript

Intro: Recapping The Series So Far

We're up to the third of four weeks in a series about Sabbath. This is already the second time in this series that you've heard a version of the Ten Commandments used as one of the Scripture texts. Bert also used a very similar text a couple weeks ago, but his was from Exodus.

In the Exodus version, the reason for the Sabbath was given as:

> 11 Because the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and everything that is in them in six days, but rested on the seventh day. That is why the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

Sabbath there in Exodus is linked to the creation poem. It is a reminder that this is a God who is immensely creative, but it's not perpetual productivity for the sake of constant growth. This is a God who gets to the point of supporting abundant relationship with humans and says "ok, that's very good, time to rest." So, the Sabbath is to remember the presence of that loving God who created a very good world.

What is most clear and the same between the two Ten Commandment texts is what you are supposed to do: rest. That was Marlene's topic last week. The Sabbath is a reminder of the worth of humanity. We need to take care of ourselves, including regular rest. Our worth, our being loved by that creative God, is simply in our humanity.

I recap those ideas because I think they are the important basis to continue building to this week's topic, Sabbath as Resistance.

Rest for All

Here's another big idea that is in both versions of the Sabbath command: the command to rest applies to everybody. It's for you, your children, your servants, your animals, and immigrants living among you. The Deuteronomy version even repeats the servant part a second time, in case you didn't catch it the first.

I think we need to pause for a second to recognize that's the radical part. It's never been radical that those with wealth and power take regular rest. A quote I saw going around social media said, "modern luxury is the ability to think clearly, sleep deeply, move slowly & live quietly in a society

designed to prevent all four.” Rest is often presented as a luxury for those with enough privilege to get away with it.

This leads into how the Deuteronomy text diverges the most from the Exodus one. Once we get to WHY the Sabbath is commanded, it’s a completely different reason:

> 15 Remember that you were a slave in Egypt, but the Lord your God brought you out of there with a strong hand and an outstretched arm. That’s why the Lord your God commands you to keep the Sabbath day.

The Exodus version links the command to the creation poem and God’s rest. This one links the idea of Sabbath to the story of God’s rescuing the people from slavery in Egypt, a time when they could not rest.

God says, "you cannot do that to yourselves again or inflict it on others again." The inclusion of servants and immigrants and even animals in the rest is explicitly discouraging using a religious rule as an excuse to exploit others. It is not “I have to rest, therefore you, slave, should do it for me.” That would be easy and common, just another way for those with the privilege to rest to push down those others who do not have that privilege. It would be the same as Egypt did to them, but now they’re at the top of the pyramid of power instead of the bottom. Instead, the command says, “I have to rest and I have to honour your rest, too, especially when you have less power than me like a servant or an immigrant.”

It is a statement of resistance to the way of Pharaoh that God has just brought them out of.

Fear and Dehumanization

So, let’s follow the reference in this Deuteronomy version back to what they are being told to remember, that time as slaves in Egypt. I went back to start at Exodus 1, which seemed like a logical place to start the story of the exodus.

There’s a big idea in here that I had overlooked in other times reading it. Sometimes you don’t notice something until you start to really sit with it for a sermon, and then it seems obvious in hindsight. It’s honestly one of the best things about doing this once or twice a year.

The entire explanation for why Pharaoh decided to enslave a whole group of people was because he was afraid of them. The Israelites weren’t even doing anything scary, as far as the text says at least. There is no inciting incident mentioned of the Israelites first expressing a desire to overthrow Egyptian leadership. But Pharaoh got scared that there were “too many” people who were different than him. Without any more reason than that, he becomes afraid that he will no longer hold all the power over them.

He did what anybody who is driven by fear of losing power does; he tries to reassert his power by flexing it against them. You know, it’s kind of like when one world leader points out that another world leader is unreliable and just likes to throw power around to benefit himself. Then that second world leader responds with threats and publicly kicking the first world leader out of the club of the super cool leaders who give the second world leader money and promise to never say mean things about him. The second world leader is kind of proving the first world leader’s point. *heavy

sarcasm* Obviously this is purely hypothetical, definitely not the kind of thing that happens every day now.

Anyway, when throwing power around doesn't work to calm Pharaoh's fears, he escalates even more, and the Egyptians started looking at the Israelites with "disgust and dread." In other words, they start viewing them as less human and needing to be enslaved. It was all because Pharaoh was afraid that the mere presence of difference would threaten his power.

Those who already have a lot of power and privilege are often terrified of human difference and try hard to convince us that we should be, too. They cannot imagine a world that is not governed by a desire to rule over those who are different. That means difference itself is a threat that requires escalating violence to contain. They might think they will be happy and feel secure as soon as they assert just a little bit more control, but they never will. Because the real problem was not people being different. It was their fear, and they've put themselves in this cycle of becoming increasingly afraid.

The Quest for More Power

As we proceed forward to chapter 5, we see another related factor in Pharaoh's motivation. He makes the Israelites produce just as many bricks but refuses to give them straw to be able to do it. There are a couple of ways we could read this:

My first instinct was to assume that there is no way Pharaoh genuinely believed that the Israelites could make just as many bricks with less resources. Therefore, he must have just been doing it to be cruel and to feel more powerful by comparison. That's textbook bullying behaviour. We certainly see a lot of that in the news, too.

But then I remember how this all started with fear of difference leading to dehumanization. In Exodus 5:9, after Moses and Aaron have asked basically for a weekend off to worship God, Pharaoh says to "make the men's work so hard that it's all they can do, and they can't focus on these empty lies." He wants to scrub away any kind of humanity that they are still trying to claim, any reason for their existence, like a God that cares about them. He wants them to only exist to make bricks for his profit.

Now we see how the dehumanization and the seeking of more power go hand in hand. This cycle might get started from either direction, but once it starts, the two pieces can keep feeding into each other.

It makes me think maybe Pharaoh really did believe he could squeeze out a little bit more profit. If the Israelites aren't human in his eyes, if they purely exist for his gain, why not save a little bit more by not providing materials? That seems consistent with Pharaoh's mindset. It's also consistent in how a lot of big corporations operate today, trying to sap out every bit of value for their shareholders no matter how much it hurts their customers.

This feedback loop of fear and rationalizing hurting others for profit is easiest to see with the wealthiest among us. You don't get to be super rich without exploiting some people along the way. The more you exploit, the more detached you become and the more comfortable it is to do it even more.

But it's not just a problem for the super rich. It is a temptation for all of us.

In fact, in many cases, for those super rich to profit off the work of others, they need the rest of us to operate off a similar mindset. We get a lot of effort and money thrown at us to try to suck us farther into that destructive loop, to try to convince us that we need to play that same game of climbing over others to get to the top.

We will get the politicians and the thinktanks pushing narratives that we need to be afraid of anybody who is different than us. We are reassured that it is okay, probably even good, to hurt those others.

We'll get a lot of advertising telling us how we are not complete if we don't pursue having more power and wealth for ourselves. Those ads will even be personalized now, using a couple decades of mining everything we do online for data to make sure those ads hit as close as possible to our deepest insecurities. If you just buy this, your life will be better. Don't slow down enough to consider that it means you'd have less to share generously with those that really need it. Don't even think about those things that probably should be a higher priority for yourself. Sabbath is one act of resistance to this, but I'll briefly put on my tech person hat to say: so is installing an ad blocker on your devices. Seriously, do it.

Even the concept of rest itself can get hijacked to further the push for more productivity. Some of the smarter managers will say that if you need a break, that is allowed within reason, but primarily so that you can be more productive later. We need rest because that's actually how we get the most done in the long run. This argument goes all the way back to Aristotle. It's also scientifically true; that is how we get the most done in the long run. But I think that argument comes up short of the picture of Sabbath being painted here. That's still the Pharaoh mindset that we exist primarily for production, just with an extra little note about how to optimize that production.

Abraham Joshua Heschel in his classic work on the Sabbath said the same. Heschel argues that "to the biblical mind, however, labor is the means toward an end, and the Sabbath as a day of rest, as a day of abstaining from toil, is not for the purpose of recovering one's lost strength and becoming fit for the forthcoming labor. The Sabbath is a day for the sake of life." The biblical framing of the Sabbath flips the more productivity version completely on its head. We don't observe Sabbath for the sake of being more productive. We are productive for the sake of being able to observe Sabbath, where we have a chance to resonate with our true humanity.

Just as Pharaoh tried to cut away the humanity of the Israelites, there are a lot of pressures on us to strip away our own humanity. We are constantly encouraged, in ways both subtle and sometimes obvious, to just be good producers and consumers. Like Pharaoh said, we are supposed to work so hard that it's all we can do, and we can't focus on ideas like a God who loves us just as we are and wants to liberate us from oppression.

Jesus on Resisting Scarcity

Jesus offered some wisdom about trying to reclaim some humanity in the face of this destructive cycle as well, including in the Matthew 6 text.

He says instead of scarcity and a need to constantly push for more at the expense of others, God offers abundance. God provides enough for the birds of the air, the grass, the lilies, and will do the same for you. It's a reaffirmation of the creation poem's claim that God made the world very good.

In one sense, this is very simple and straightforward. There are two opposite things. One of them is destructive. The other affirms our humanity and the humanity of others around us. Pick the good one.

Sometimes I think that the Bible's language makes stuff like this sound too straightforward. Similarly, in a lot of churches, one of the common baptismal vows is something about renouncing Satan and all his works. Sometimes I think there's not enough nuance about good and evil and the complexities of the world in that kind of language.

Then there are times where I hear the latest update on the authoritarian police state conducting kidnappings, torture, murder, and the dismantling of every human right we hold dear. Then I see resistance to this reality, like when thousands of people are out in -26°C Minneapolis weather. In one location about 100 clergy were simply kneeling and praying out in the freezing cold, until they got arrested. Moments like that make me think that sometimes it really can be that clear what it looks like to renounce Satan and all his works. We need the nuance and certainly the love for enemies when we're talking about specific people caught up in those evil systems, and we did see some of that, too, like the story of the woman who saved the life of the ICE agent who had arrested her. But we need unashamed clarity in renouncing those evil systems, too.

Sabbath is one of our tools to do that renouncing. There's a good argument that Friday's general strike and protests in Minneapolis was the best embodiment of this component of Sabbath I have ever seen. They chose to sacrifice work productivity and at least a chance at some comfort inside, to reclaim their humanity and the humanity of those being attacked the most. They chose to set aside all the reasons why they could have opted out.

That shows it isn't a simple "just choose better." That must have been really hard. I had a hard enough time walking from the bus stop to work on Friday after I missed a transfer, and it wasn't even as cold here.

It's also slow work. It won't always look like progress immediately.

But one essential component of what makes all that really hard and slow work possible is that they did it together. At minimum you're going to need to be able to fight that battle against the fear and scarcity thinking alongside others trying to do the same.

Sabbath and "church" are not strictly the same thing. They're not even the same day of the week. Plus, for a church like ours that relies on a lot of volunteers every week, often it doesn't even feel like the usual definition of rest. Marlene touched on this well last week, including doing a good job challenging that maybe we need to expand our concept of rest. But like Sabbath, what church can do is remind us of a few important ideas like that a creative God loves us just as we are and provides enough for us. It can also sometimes get very practical helping each other with questions like budgets and how to align those to our real values. Or from me as a tech guy, it might be helping you with things like using an ad blocker or finding alternatives to relying on US Big Tech companies. I've spent a lot of time recently thinking about that last one.

I will not always get it right. You will not always get it right. We as a collective will not always get it right. Sometimes we will hurt ourselves or others when we fall into those traps of fear and scarcity. Sometimes we'll find ourselves going along with an oppressive system because it is those other people who we barely think of as humans being hurt, not our people. Sometimes we will forget the way of Sabbath and fall back into the way of Pharaoh.

Conclusion: Sabbath as Resistance

When that happens, we are lovingly invited back into Sabbath again and into community again. We are invited back toward a God that loves us in all our messy and sometimes unproductive humanity. There's a reason why Sabbath is a weekly discipline, not a one-time miracle fix.

We still need those regular reminders as much as ever. Those temptations are realities of our world today just as much as they were at the time the laws about Sabbath were being handed down. If anything, it all seems to be going faster by the year. The world often demands that we "move fast and break things" to reference an old Facebook mantra.

In the face of these realities, Sabbath becomes an act of resistance. It is a way of saying "no" to those things that we desperately need to say no to.

Sabbath can remind us of the slower but much more important work of being human together. Maybe instead of moving fast and breaking things, the way of God often looks a lot more like moving slow and fixing things.

Deleted Scenes

These were segments that got cut for time.

The Shabbos Goy Approach

This is related to the idea about Sabbath being for everyone, not just the observant Jews.

This raises one of the first questions for me. If like in the Exodus text, Sabbath is ONLY about worshipping God, then why would it apply to animals? Animals don't worship the Israelite God or any other god as far as we know. Even most immigrants are probably not worshipping the Israelite God. They don't care that the Israelite creation poem says a god they don't believe in rested on that day. If the purpose of the Sabbath is for the faithful worshippers to devote their time to their God, it would honestly make more sense that it would be a perfect chance to let the animals and the immigrants and the servants pick up the slack while you're doing your worship.

I know some modern versions of Judaism do take this approach. There are many things they will not do on the Sabbath but if a Gentile is visiting, the Gentile can do it for them. There's even a term for it, the Shabbos goy, or Sabbath Gentile. That does best fit our postmodern sensibilities, too, where we generally believe that just because we believe a practice applies to us from our religious tradition doesn't mean that we should apply it to others.

But that is missing one of the big components that is conveyed more by the Deuteronomy text...

Categories of Actions

This idea was in place in a few different spots of the sermon before being cut entirely, but I had wanted to expand on the place of being able to say "no" to things.

A while ago I was listening to an audiobook about the climate crisis. I don't even remember the name of the book unfortunately, but there one thing that came up that really stuck with me. It was the idea that there are a few different ways of working toward making the world a little bit better, about climate or about lots of other things.

1. Reform: working within existing systems to help mitigate the damage. You might think of that as some of our better politicians or public servants helping prepare policy, for example.
2. Healing or charity: helping restore those who have already been hurt by whatever harmful system we're talking about. Lots of non-profits will fall in that category.
3. Direct resistance: naming the evil thing that is happening, drawing attention to it so others are aware, including those who might be unknowingly participating in it or who do sort of know but find ways to rationalize it to themselves. You can think of protests or petitions.
4. Building an alternative: showing that a better way of being is possible and inviting people into it. In that climate category it might be something like a solar energy coop, showing that you don't need to invest in fossil fuels.

Importantly, we don't need to all do all of them all of the time. It's too much. You're not going to do it all well. We probably mostly need to pick one or two areas that we really care about and can do some good in, find some community that is working on doing that on an ongoing basis, and really

invest some focused energy on that. That's a lot more effective than constantly bouncing around between whatever is trending on social media that day.

Anyway, my general experience in Mennonite or other Anabaptist churches is that we like a lot of the building an alternative category, other than maybe not always being so good at inviting others into it. And we have a pretty good dose of healing or charity as well, as most churches do. We mostly opt out of reform and out of direct resistance, which often comes out of wanting to maintain some separation from the ways of the world. It is generally true that I do not like to spend more time than I have to on the things that we are saying "no" to, those things that we are opposing. Especially in a sermon, I usually do see the primary function as being inviting people into that better alternative, that thing that we say yes to.

My challenge in how we drew up this series is to slow down enough to spend some time unpacking what we need to resist, some of the evils that we need to say no to, allowing the more positive alternative to remain for Carrie next week.

Enshittification

This came as an expansion on the idea of the pursuit of profit sometimes being to such an extreme that it is even hurting the users.

Cory Doctorow has coined the term enshittification. If you'd prefer, you can call it crapification or platform decay. It was initially meant to describe specifically how technology platforms decline over time. First, the vendors creating the platform are focused on making things good for users. Then they might shift to prioritizing business customers, the ones who are actually giving them money, like the advertisers who are buying all that user data for ad slots. Then they'll go one step further, which is to prioritize short-term value for shareholders, which often means doing things that are actively hostile to both the end users and the businesses. They can get away with it because most of these platforms are very closed with a strong network effect and high switching costs. You can't just leave Facebook and take all your contacts with you. That is on purpose; Facebook designed it that way. So you stay, even if you can consciously say that you think it is doing you more harm than good. Doctorow's original meaning for it was a little more precise to this platform decay process, but as language often does, it has since taken on a life of its own to be more generally any time a company decides to screw over their customers to make a little more profit.

I could talk more about how to resist this in terms of technology design, using the work of Doctorow and others, but for the sake of this sermon, I'm going to simply note that this is a modern version of the scarcity mindset much like we saw with Pharaoh. Even when we are talking about companies with market cap valuations in the trillions of dollars and maybe a couple hundred billion on the balance sheet, they will still try to squeeze in one more ad, or charge a couple percent more in fees, in order to always get a little bit more and it will always be at the expense of everybody else. They are in this same cycle, constantly demanding more and more power. They never see it as enough. All they can do is keep going, making it worse and worse.

Consumerism

The flip side of the demand to always be more productive is that even when we rest, it should be primarily spent consuming instead. Marlene's work in the previous message about rest did not

make this idea less necessary to include, as she discussed how rest really means relationships, not just sitting on a couch.

If you do take that break, we hear the message that you better at least be using it to consume the production of others. A lot of what our culture now considers rest are things like watching TV. I like TV. I think there's a lot of good things that happen in that medium of storytelling. But sometimes it feels like it's just another chore, trying to keep up with the infinite supply of streaming services, and a lot of the time it might be a nice break but it's usually not any kind of reclaiming my humanity.

Heschel

This was a quote from the very first page of Heschel's work on the Sabbath that I found incredible, but it was too long to try to quote it all:

“Technical civilization is man's conquest of space. It is a triumph frequently achieved by sacrificing an essential ingredient of existence, namely, time. In technical civilization, we expend time to gain space. To enhance our power in the world of space is our main objective. Yet to have more does not mean to be more. The power we attain in the world of space terminates abruptly at the borderline of time. But time is the heart of existence.

“To gain control of the world of space is certainly one of our tasks. The danger begins when in gaining power in the realm of space we forfeit all aspirations in the realm of time. There is a realm of time where the goal is not to have but to be, not to own but to give, not to control but to share, not to subdue but to be in accord. Life goes wrong when the control of space, the acquisition of things of space, becomes our sole concern.”

“Nothing is more useful than power, nothing more frightful. We have often suffered from degradation by poverty, now we are threatened with degradation through power. There is happiness in the love of labor, there is misery in the love of gain. Many hearts and pitchers are broken at the fountain of profit. Selling himself into slavery to things, man becomes a utensil that is broken at the fountain.”

Responsibility and Rest

I was briefly going to spend more time tackling how the words of Jesus in Matthew 6 can be abused. That included dismissing mental health concerns – clinical anxiety is not the same thing as being stuck in the destructive scarcity loop - but also included a note on maintaining a sense of responsibility.

The words of Jesus are not about denying responsibility to care for yourself and others in the ways that you can. I think Abraham Joshua Heschel in his classic work on The Sabbath expresses some of this tension well and was along the same lines as Jesus in Matthew 6.

“Our intention here is not to deprecate the world of space. To disparage space and the blessing of things of space, is to disparage the works of creation, the works which God beheld and saw “it was good.”... What we plead against is man's unconditional surrender to space, his enslavement to things. We must not forget that it is not a thing that lends significance to a moment; it is a moment that lends significance to things.”