

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH  
COMPASS, PA

August 20, 2023 – PENTECOST 12 / PROPER 15, YR. A

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Sermon: “*Keep Holy the Sabbath—and Rest in God!*”\*

Isaiah 56:1-7	(The Lord commands us to keep the Sabbath holy)
Psalms 67	(A prayer for God's mercy and blessings)
Romans 11:13-15, 29-32	(God's calling and gifts to us are irrevocable)
St. Matthew 15:21-28	(Jesus heals a woman because of her faith)

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The last time I taught a Confirmation class, we had an exercise in which I asked the kids, “What’s the difference between a machine and a human being?” One boy quickly answered, “people care; they love.” His brother chimed in, “they can have a relationship with God.” Then we agreed, “human beings need friends.” All, true observations. However, one area we did not explore is that a major difference between a machine and a human being is that machines don’t need rest. Given enough electricity and proper maintenance, they can run 24/7, 365 days a year. Even so, there are still times when manufacturing plants have to shut down or go offline, for repairs or upgrades.

We might think the only entity in the universe that doesn’t have to quit for awhile is God. But Genesis 2:2-3 (NIV) tells us: “By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. Then God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done.”

Not only did the Lord God Almighty create the world and everything in it, but also He created the days of the week, including a day set aside for rest. We trace the origins of both *sabbatical* and Sabbath to the Greek word *sabaton*, which itself traces to the Hebrew word *shabbāth*, meaning “rest.” Known as “the Sabbath” in ancient Israel, observing it was so important that God made it number four in the Ten Commandments. We read in Exodus 20:8-11 (NIV): “Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God.

On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns. For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.”

In today’s Old Testament lesson, the prophet Isaiah speaks of God’s desire for justice, righteousness, salvation, and deliverance, clearly linking these to faithful Sabbath-keeping, while adding to them the graces and blessings that come from doing so. In verses 6 & 7, God says through Isaiah: “Every one who keeps the Sabbath, and does not profane it, and holds fast my covenant—these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer. ...”

My former Bishop in the Diocese of Albany once wrote an article about how many other problems in our society—such as poverty, exploitation, and crime—ultimately stem from our nation’s failure to honor the Sabbath. In this, he echoed Isaiah’s linking of justice and righteousness with keeping the Sabbath.

But what does it mean for us to faithfully keep the Sabbath—this fourth Commandment that so many, whether in or out of the Church, blithely ignore? Let’s go back to the Exodus passage which directs God’s people to “remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy.”

First, to “remember the Sabbath day” means, “Don’t forget to take a day off.” In other words, God intends for us to rest, relax, stop working, and leave the household chores; cleaning; laundry; lawn-mowing; shopping; banking; studying; etcetera, for the other six days of the week. Now, I realize a few of our parishioners have to work on Sundays, and that’s fine, as long as they reserve one day a week to rest, relax, and focus on God and what He wants.

The Lord is so serious about this that in Exodus 16 He gives the Israelites manna—bread from heaven—daily, enough for each person to eat. But the people got greedy and started hoarding it. What happened? Overnight, it developed worms, rotted, and stank! But then Moses instructed the people to gather *twice as much* on the sixth day, and refrain from gathering on the seventh day.

“This is what the Lord has commanded,” he writes in verse 23: “Tomorrow is a day of solemn rest, a holy Sabbath to the Lord ...” And when the people collected and prepared enough manna for the weekend, not gathering or cooking on the Sabbath, *that* manna did not spoil. Moreover, when they went out to look for some on the seventh day, there was none! *God’s* grocery store was closed on Sunday, so why are we still going to the Giant, Weis, or Walmart, after church?!

In answer to the people’s puzzlement about the lack of manna, Moses again reminds them (v. 29): “See! The Lord has given you the Sabbath, therefore on the sixth day he gives you bread for two days” and the passage concludes: “so the people rested on the seventh day” (v. 30.) Okay, so we are beginning to get the “rest” part.

Or, are we? Can we even *begin to imagine* one whole day, every week, in which we limit the time we spend at the computer or watching TV; ignore our cell phones except for non-work-related calls; *refuse to shop*; and actually spend quality time with our loved ones, or peacefully alone, relaxing and recharging? Our 24/7 electronic society is making us more and more like machines that churn out stuff, hour after hour, day after day, and less like human beings that, as my Confirmands said, “love, care, have a relationship with God, need friends” and need to power down.

The Bible tells us that in addition to taking a much-needed time out on the Sabbath, we are to “keep it holy,” specifically, “unto the Lord.” In other words, our Sunday rest is not simply a personal necessity for down time; it is to be *God-centered* rest. Our attention is to be directed to the Lord in a way that is more concentrated and steady than on ordinary weekdays. We keep this day holy by maintaining our focus on a Holy God. That means attending church every Sunday that our health permits; partaking of the Sacraments; and, if we do any work at all, carrying out the work of Christ, such as calling someone to pray for them, visiting the sick, or helping the poor.

One thing people overlook about the Sabbath-keeping Commandment is that God also prohibits us from fobbing off this requirement on anyone else. In other words, we should not get our relatives, friends, neighbors, babysitters, or even our washer-dryer to do our work while we are justifiably loafing.

The reason given in both Genesis 2 and Exodus 20 why God blessed and hallowed the seventh day is that “on it God rested from all His work which He had done in Creation.” But what does it mean that God rested? It means He was satisfied that His work of Creation was complete and was “very good.” (Or, as one of the boys exclaimed in class, “God said it was ‘wonderful!’”). The Lord’s rest meant He wanted to step back and in leisure savor the beauty and completeness of His creative work.

This is the true basis for God’s hallowing and blessing the day of rest. In effect, God is saying, “Let My highest creatures, the ones made in My image, stop every seven days and commemorate with me the fact that I, the Creator, have done all this. Let them stop working and focus on Me, the source of all they have. I am the fountain of blessing. I have made the very hands and minds with which they work. Let one day out of seven demonstrate that all land, all animals, all raw materials, all breath, strength, thought, emotion, in fact, *everything* comes from Me. Let humankind look to me in leisure one day out of seven for the blessings that are so elusive in the affairs of this world.”<sup>1</sup> To do so may require us to humble ourselves before the Lord, and possibly, to repent, as well.

One day of rest out of every seven, kept holy to the Lord, reminds us—and shows the world—that God is our Creator and our Deliverer; that we did not make ourselves; and that we cannot sustain or save ourselves, without His grace. All things are from God, through God, and to God. Lest we ever forget this and begin to take our own strength, work, and needs too seriously, we must take one day a week to cease from our labors and focus on God as the source of all blessing. Sabbath is a time to respond to His direction in Psalm 46:10: “Be still and know that I am God.”

And because God also “blessed” the Sabbath, He has made Sunday (the Day of Resurrection) a day rich with the spiritual blessings of salvation, grace, peace, joy, and fellowship—both with one another, and with the Lord.

Some Christians who actually think about Sabbath-keeping tend to focus on a long list of what not to do. I once knew a woman who was raised as a fundamentalist in rural Texas. Her family didn’t do *anything* on Sunday! They just sat around with their hands folded in their laps. But the Sabbath is for doing wholesome activities that are delightful and pleasurable, ones which give us joy, or make us smile and laugh, as we take delight in the Lord, in His Creation, and in each other.

But what about Jesus’ view of the Sabbath? In Matthew 12, the Pharisees complain that His hungry disciples are picking and eating grain on the Sabbath, which the religious leaders view as “harvesting.” Jesus reminds them that King David and his companions once ate the consecrated bread from the Tabernacle when they were hungry, but God didn’t punish them, because He is merciful.

Jesus concludes this discussion in Mark 2:27, saying: “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.” He’s telling them the Sabbath commandment was not given to Israel simply because God wanted people to keep religious rituals. Its purpose was to meet their needs for rest, relaxation, and renewal.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, because Jesus makes the point that God is a God of *mercy*, the Sabbath is an occasion in which to extend that mercy to others, through charitable deeds or kindnesses extended.

If we begin to seriously keep the Sabbath, not out of obligation, but out of love for God, we should not find this custom to be oppressive or restricting us in some way. St. John writes in 1 John 5:3, “For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome.” The measure of your love for God is the measure of the joy you will receive in focusing on Him, during a day of purposeful rest.

So, I encourage you to sincerely give it a try: Do your chores, bill-paying, grass-mowing, shopping, etc. on six days of the week, and save one for God and His “wonderful” Creation, which includes people you love and care about—as well as, those who need, yet have not experienced, God’s love and care.

*Amen.*

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<sup>\*</sup> Adapt. N. George-Hacker, “...Rest in God,” 17 August 2014, St. Christopher’s Episcopal Church, Cobleskill NY. Used with permission.

<sup>1</sup> Adapt. Scott Kircher, “Keep the Sabbath Holy,” 26 July 2009, [SermonCentral.com](http://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/keep-the-sabbath-holy-scott-kircher-sermon-on-commandments-sabbath-137469.asp) <<http://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/keep-the-sabbath-holy-scott-kircher-sermon-on-commandments-sabbath-137469.asp>> 13 August 2014. Used with permission.

<sup>2</sup> Adapt. Paul Kroll, “Old Testament Laws: Does Mark 2:27-28 Command Christians to Observe the Weekly Sabbath???” [Grace International Communion](https://archive.gci.org/articles/does-mark-227-28-command-christians-to-observe-the-weekly-sabbath/), 2023 <<https://archive.gci.org/articles/does-mark-227-28-command-christians-to-observe-the-weekly-sabbath/>> 12 August 2023.