

# From the Pulpit

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## *“Sabbath: The Day God Rested... Why Don't We Rest?”*

*Genesis 2:1-4, 15-17, 3:1-7; Romans 5:12-19;  
Matthew 4:1-11*

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A sermon delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational UCC, Columbus, Ohio, March 9, 2014, Lent 1, dedicated to the Coalition of Immokalee Workers, especially those witnessing in Columbus to earn a fair wage working for Wendy's Inc., to my colleagues in ministry who give themselves each day to bring in God's kingdom and a prayer for them to find Sabbath rest & always to the glory of God!

***“Sabbath: The Day God Rested...Why Don't We Rest?”***

***(Part 2 of 9 in sermon series, “Sabbath, The Seventh Day of Rest”)***

***Genesis 2:1-4, 15-17, 3:1-7; Romans 5:12-19; Matthew 4:1-11***

*“ Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude. <sup>2</sup> And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. <sup>3</sup> So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation. <sup>4</sup> These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created.” Genesis 2:1-4*

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*Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.*

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I penned these words as a firsthand experience of Shabbat in Jerusalem four years ago. *“It is late-Friday afternoon in Jerusalem, Israel. As the sun moves to the western horizon and evening approaches, Jerusalem turns to Shabbat or “Sabbath rest.” The greetings change from “Shalom” to “Shabbat Shalom”- which simply means “Sabbath Peace.” People scurry about getting last minute shopping, cleaning, cooking, and preparation completed for the 25 hour day ahead. Shops begin to close. Cars and buses, trains and planes cease their motion. People cease their motion. As the sun sets over the mountains to the west, the sixth day comes to a close. Shabbat is Now.*

*I have never experienced anything like this in my life. I have never seen a city become still. As a child, Sundays came close. But, even they were not the same. We would go to church, worship and return home. Stores were closed. No work for parents. No sports for the kids. No school or social events. Nothing of*

*the regular work week seemed to invade Sundays. The TV was off until the Ed Sullivan Show. All this changed with the “Blue Laws” in America which allowed shopping, commerce, sports, community calendars and even school events to be held. There is no real Sabbath (no Shabbat) in America today. Religious Jews try hard to hold to it. But, it is a challenge.*

*“Remember the Sabbath Day and keep it Holy,” proclaims the fourth commandment in Exodus 20:8-11. Shabbat in Israel feels like a holy day. It is a quiet time. It is time when life slows to a near stop. People worship God. People walk to synagogues. People spend time visiting with each other. They see each other. They engage strangers on the pathways of Shabbat.*

*Shops are closed. Work stops. Israel Airlines does not fly and many other planes stay grounded. Religious Jews don’t drive. Secular Jews and others are mindful of driving less or not at all. The pace is slow. There is rest. There is stillness. There is Shabbat.*

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*On Saturday Evening the Sun will set again. Shabbat will end. Sunday brings a new work week to Israel, which is problematic for Christians who wish to “Hallow” their Sabbath day. But that is not today’s problem. For today, I will savor Shabbat. I have only two more Shabbats in Israel. I will savor each as well.”*

Today is our Sabbath day. In Christian faith, we see each Sunday as a Day of Resurrection – a little Easter in our lives. It is the day of new life, reawakening, rest and joy in Christ. We were reminded by Kevin Jones in his wonderful newsletter article on Lent that today is the First Sunday **IN Lent**. While the penitential season of Lent has 40 days – the Sabbath Days of Lent are set apart. Enjoy your break today! You have five chances take on what you have given up and to give up what you have taken on!

Today, let us recall that the first Shabbat was God’s Shabbat. After the architect and artist of space and time and all creation had given everything within God’s essence to make and mold a world within the created universe. Then came the seventh day. Our text from Genesis 2:1-4 does not say that God stopped on the eve of Shabbat. There was an act of creation on the seventh day, too. God created “**Menuha**” on the seventh day (Sabbath, Abraham Joshua Heschel, Farrar, Straus, Giroux, NY, NY, 2005, p. 22).

In his little book, The Sabbath, Abraham Joshua Heschel writes, “**Menuha**,” which we render as “rest” means so much more than withdrawal from labor and exertion, more than freedom from toil, strain or activity of any

kind. *Menuha* is not a negative concept but something real and intrinsically positive.... What was created on the seventh day? *Tranquility, serenity, peace and repose.*

*Menuha* is the state wherein a (person) lies still, wherein the wicked cease from troubling, and the weary are at rest. It is the state where there is no strife, no fighting, no fear and no distrust. The essence of Good life is *Menuha*. “*the Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures, he leadeth me beside still waters* (The waters of “*menuhot*”). In later times, *Menuha* becomes a synonym for life in the world to come, for eternal life. (*Ibid*, p. 23).

Dr. Heschel continues, “*In Judaism we pray on the other six days, ‘Guard our going out and our coming in.’ On the Sabbath day, the prayer changes to ‘Peace be upon your tent.’ And the prayer we pray on the Sabbath when returning the synagogue to home is, ‘Peace be to you, Angel of Peace’*” (*Ibid*).

In the Talmud it is written that on the first Sabbath, Adam was so overcome with joy, he sang the first song of praise to Shabbat. And God asked Adam, “*You sing a song of praise to the Sabbath Day, and sing none to me, the God of the Sabbath?*” Whereupon Sabbath rose from her seat, laid on her face before the Lord our God and said, “*All praise and thanks go to you Lord. And all of creation added to her song, ‘we praise thy name O Most High!’*”

To this day, it is said that angels have six-wings, one for each day of the week with which they chant their song of praise. But, on the seventh day the only one who chants, who sings is Sabbath herself. It has been and always will be that Sabbath chants her hymn to God and all creation joins her song. To this day, it is believed that Sabbath – in her wisdom and joy - teaches ALL beings whom to praise (*Ibid*, p. 24).

### **We must make a clear distinction about this holy and sacred day.**

Sabbath is always a reminder of two worlds. Sabbath reminds us of this world and the world to come. It is an example of both worlds - for the Sabbath is joy, holiness, and rest. Joy is a part of this world. Holiness and rest and are part of the world to come.

**Sabbath always belongs to God.** Remember what I said on Ash Wednesday, “**Sabbath is the name of God,**” according to Zohar, the books of Jewish Mysticism. In its origins in Genesis, we need to remember that Sabbath was a day of rest, not a day of worship. God was so pleased and confident in the goodness of Creation which God had made, God felt that a gift was needed – a gift

of rest. So God gave Godself a gift - a day off – the gift of Sabbath.

(Aside: I was reminded by one of our teens that by saying what I just said, it means they don't have to come to worship. Very sly.... But, I would say that it means they need to find a way to rest and peace, a way to take a break. Hopefully, a small part of their break will be with us on the Sabbath Day...).

Giving Godself a day of rest says a lot about the nature of God. First – the six days: We need to remember God's approach to the six days of work is not found to be coercion, but faithful invitation. God is not a taskmaster, but an invitational co-creator. And on the seventh day, God spends the day in serenity and peace. This says a lot about the God of Israel. It also says a lot about the world which God created. The world is safe in God's hands. The world will not disintegrate if we stop our efforts. 14% of the time, God rests. The other 86% of the time, God creates and makes things happen. We need to remind ourselves of this God-given truth.

So Sabbath becomes a day to end exploitation. Sabbath becomes a day of revolutionary equality in society. On the Sabbath day, all rest equally – no matter how rich or poor. Whether farm workers or corporate CEOs, the Sabbath day is holy. Sabbath is an unspoken prayer about the new sanity shaped by the power and graciousness of God. God's Sabbath is a continuous Blessing!

We are called back to sanity and peace in the words of John Greenleaf Whittier's hymn, "O Lord and Father of Mankind":

*Dear Lord and Father of Mankind, forgive our foolish ways,  
re clothe us in our rightful mind, In purer lives thy service find,  
in deeper reverence praise.*

*O Sabbath rest by Galilee, O calm of hills above...  
Take from our lives the strain and stress, and let our ordered lives confess  
the beauty of thy peace.*

(Drawn from Walter Brueggemann commentary on Genesis, pp. 35-36).

As I said at the beginning of my sermon today, I love the day of Sabbath in Judaism. Shabbat (or "Sabbath") services reverence the holiness of God.

***Baruch atah Adonai elohaynu melech ha'olam asher kidshanu bemitzvotav  
vetzivanu l'hadlik ner shel Shabbat.***

Praised are You, Adonai our God, Sovereign of the Universe, who makes us holy with *mitzvot* and instructs us to kindle the lights of *Shabbat*.

All praise goes up and out to God. Even in the prayers for those who have died unto God, the prayer is about God's goodness and greatness – not about the grief which surrounds and touches those who worship God.

I am often in the synagogue on Friday evenings. I stumble through the Hebrew – as I did a moment ago. But, there, enveloped in the fragrance of prayer, I hear God's voice calling me to stillness and peace. At times I have felt the God breathing deep – inhaling, exhaling – resting.

This week, many of us received one of the daily Lenten meditations – a quote from Abraham Joshua Heschel about the uniqueness of Shabbat – a quote I shared in my monthly newsletter article in March as well. He reminds us that Sabbath is about time and not space. He writes in The Sabbath:

*“The Bible is more concerned with time than with space. It sees the world in the dimension of time...The meaning of Sabbath is to celebrate time rather than space; on the Sabbath we try to become attuned to holiness in time. It is a day in which we are called upon to share what is eternal in time, to turn from the results of creation to the mystery of creation, from the world of creation to the creation of the world.”*

My prayer for you this day is that you find rest. It may be in an afternoon nap. It may be reading a good book you have longed to throw yourself into. Give yourself permission to rest. Remember – if the Sabbath is in God, of God and good enough for God – it is good enough for you, too. Allow the peace of God to surround you and hold you today.

“Shabbat Shalom.” Sabbath Peace to you. Amen.

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