

From the Pulpit

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“Sabbath as Risk, Resistance and Promise”

*(3rd of 9 in the sermon series, “Sabbath,
The Seventh Day of Rest”)*

*Genesis 12:1-4a; Romans 4:1-5, 13-17;
John 3:1-17; Exodus 20: 8-11*

March 16th, 2014
By The Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens
Senior Minister

A sermon delivered by The Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Lent 3, March 16, 2014, dedicated to our newest members, Kate and Dan Erickson, Andrew Rozmiarek, Lael and Kai Weyenberg, Janet Newcity and Christopher Gelpi and always to the glory of God!

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(3rd of 9 in the sermon series, “Sabbath, The Seventh Day of Rest”)
Genesis 12:1-4a; Romans 4:1-5, 13-17; John 3:1-17

8 Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy. 9 Six days you shall labor and do all your work. 10 But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. 11 For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and consecrated it.

Exodus 20: 8-11

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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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Our lives of faith are not lived in a vacuum. We live our lives of faith in relation to a multiplicity of cultures. We are always confronted by and called to worship in cultures which challenge the culture of God in Jesus Christ.

The predominant culture of our times is the consumer culture, or for our purposes, the Culture of the Market God. The Market God is a powerful God. The Market God – like the God of Pharaoh in the Book of Exodus - wants us to work harder, have no rest, take whatever goods we want, consume whatever we desire, and revise the truth to get it. The Market God wants us to worship at the nearest store, shop 24/7 on-line, and never slow down in so doing. The Market God demands obedience and expects us to bow before him.

Meanwhile, there is a God whom we have promised to worship and glorify. This God, our God is the God of Abraham and Sarah; of Isaac and Rebekah; of Jacob and Rachel.

Our God has a culture too. Our God has expectations for worship as well. Our God calls us to make no other idols and worship no other gods, our God expects us and all living creatures to rest on the Sabbath, to be true to our commitments, to take nothing belonging to others, to be honest in all our dealings and want nothing that belongs to others. In Jesus Christ, we are actually shown, what we believe, is the best way to honor and follow our God.

At the crossroads of cultures the God of Abraham and the God of Pharaoh – that is The Market God - crash into one another. Their values conflict. Their worlds collide. You can't follow one and have the other be alright with it.

Certainly “living into Sabbath” is a clear form of resistance to the Market God. It is risky business to rest and recover one day a week – to lay down the tools of our trades and rest.

In his newly published book, Sabbath as Resistance (and in a study which we have been following in Church School by the same name), 2012 Gladden Lecturer Dr. Walter Brueggemann writes:

Sabbath keeping is a distinctively Jewish art form. It is, however, a practice and a discipline that has long preoccupied Christians who have responded to a core requirement of the God of covenant. It is unfortunate that in U.S. society, largely out of a misunderstood Puritan heritage, Sabbath has gotten enmeshed in legalism and moralism and blue laws and life-denying practices that contradict the freedom-bestowing intention of Sabbath. Such distortions, moreover, have led to endlessly wearying quarrels about "Sunday activities" such as movies and card playing and, in some states still, purchasing liquor on Sunday.

All of that common lore in U.S. society, of course, amounts to a pitiful misrepresentation of Sabbath keeping as an art form. When taken seriously in faith by Jews--and derivatively by Christians--Sabbath keeping is a way of making a statement of peculiar identity amid a larger public identity, of maintaining and enacting a counter identity that refuses "mainstream" identity that itself entails antihuman practice and the worship of antihuman gods.

Understood in this way, Sabbath is a bodily act of testimony to alternative values and resistance to pervading values and the assumptions behind those values. Pay attention to Sabbath keeping as testimony and resistance, as an act of faith commonly shared (in different forms) by Jews and Christians.

It is true. Sabbath means resistance and risk. It means following a God who calls us up, calls us out and calls us - beloved.

In Genesis 12:1-4a, Abram is simply minding his own business (and trying to appease the Market God) when Abram's God comes and calls him to get up and go out. On this day in history, God reaches out to offer a deal to all humankind through Abram.

God promises four things to Abram. He will give birth to a great nation. He will be blessed. His name will be great. His name will be a blessing to others. For good measure God vows to bless those who bless Abram and curse those who curse him. In this Call of Abram we see the ultimate summons to the world to devote itself to God.

In essence, God chooses this man and throws an olive branch to all generations. God is saying, *"If you worship me and put your life in my hands, you will be rewarded. If you resist other gods and risk being happy, I will reward you."*

In the call of God to Abram, Abram goes forth, completely trusting in God. He goes forth completely submitting himself to God. He does this through what he does best. He sets off walking. But, this time, he walks with God. He leaves these footprints for us to follow. By walking forward in the footsteps of God, he demonstrates something important – for all us to follow. Abram doesn't believe *in God!* He *BELIEVES God*. He doesn't ask for proof. He provides the proof.

As the first man in the 20th generation of humankind, Abram is not spoken of as righteous (until the Apostle Paul calls him righteous in Romans). He is not particularly special. By the time we meet him he is old. He seems unsure. He makes mistakes. In a text which is completely focused on creation, Abraham is not able to create. His story is dominated by the childlessness. It is almost as if he is so unlike the Creator, that this makes him special. He is completely and utterly human! As such, he is completely in need of God! (Abraham, by Bruce Feiler, pp. 22-25).

While many in the human race, especially in our generation, strive to follow the Market God and become Godlike themselves - powerful, and in control, in so doing, they lack what Abram possesses. They lack absolute humanness.

Nelly Sachs, the German poet who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1966, viewed Abram as a representative human being. She sees him as one looking out at a decimated landscape, peering beyond the flames, aching for just a piece of the divine. Nelly Sachs writes: "*You have called me, Abram. And I long so much for you.*" (Ibid, p. 25).

By the 20th Generation of humankind, God certainly needs one such as this - one who is so fully human, yet one who longs so much for the divine. As much as we are like Abram - so human, and yet so longing for the divine - we too will find our rest in God. As this regards Sabbath, we need to remember that between now and next Sunday morning, over 3 billion people - or more than half the world's population known as the Children of Abraham - Jews, Christians, Muslims - will invoke the name of Abraham, the man whom God loved, the man who loved God.

It is not easy to follow God's promise - to risk and resist in this world in which we live. If we don't believe this, we should look more closely at chapter 3 in John's Gospel. Here we are presented with a refreshing story about the presence of God in Jesus Christ. A man named Nicodemus; a leader of religious Jews stepped out his comfort zone, out of his house of privilege and sought out Jesus under the cover of night. He needed to figure out who this Jesus was. What was Jesus teaching? What did he have that Nicodemus longed to have? In an exchange between the men, we come to realize Jesus has what Nicodemus is missing. Jesus has peace with God. He has the Holy Spirit. He has the keys to the kingdom of God. He has the promise of eternal life.

In the end, Jesus shares with us and with Nicodemus the truth of the Gospel in one verse (as Martin Luther called it).

God so loved the world that he gave his only Son . . . for God sent the son into the world not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him" (John 3:16,17).

Rejoice, O people! God loves you! God's son was given for you. Christ came into **the world** (not the church, not Columbus, not America, but **the entire world**). He came not to condemn the world, but to save the world!

Somewhere, between the beginning of Lent and this morning, somewhere between the beginning of each of our lives and this point, we may have lost track of the absolutely amazing gift we have in the love of God for us through our Savior, Jesus Christ. It's good to be reminded of this, today. It is also good to remember and rejoice in the truth that God is not in the business of condemning us, or the rest of the world. While others may want to play God and manipulate the words of God for judgment, not grace, God is about the business of loving and saving us and the rest of the world!

But, what does God's loving and saving business look like?

John 3:14-15 tells us that life in God's love - through Christ - is both uplifting and eternal. Like Moses' serpent in the wilderness, Jesus is lifted up - both on the cross and in the ascension into glory - and in this lifting, belief in God's sacrifice and glory are given shape and form and eternal life is offered.

Uplifting and eternal! These are the central elements of God's saving love. *I have seen the uplifting and eternal nature of God's love so often become manifest in the love, through suffering and pain, that people share in difficult and tumultuous times.* While I sometimes wish that I could wave a magic wand over the pain I see embodied in suffering love, I am also aware that so much of the immensity of love would be diminished and even unrecognizable without it. To suffer in love for the one whom you love, in the midst of their suffering, is to live life to its holiest. I believe we actually come to see eternal life in the face of such suffering. We see grace, twisted by pain, but embraced by love. We see a peace which passes human understanding, growing forth from the depth of suffering.

Years ago, in the Toledo Museum of Art, a painting entitled, "The Disposition," showed the scene at the foot of the cross following the death of Jesus. His body was disposed from the cross to the earth below. As the dead body of Jesus lies at the foot of the cross, John, the beloved disciple, is beside him, having just washed his body of blood. Jesus' mother, Mary is looking on, but close at hand. Her face is twisted in pain. Her body is turned half way toward him, half way from him. In the distance, you see several people including the shadowy figure of Peter, who had denied and abandoned Jesus in his time of crucifying death.

For those who have stood by the cross - stood by him in his suffering - there is intense pain, but their pain is holy pain. For those who have tortured him or abandoned him, the pain is different. It is the pain of unholy guilt. It is the pain of dispossession. Uplifting and eternal are elements of God's saving love.

It is what we do in the face of the cross and at the foot of the cross which matters most. If we are to experience God's uplifting and eternal love, we must go there. We must abide there.

The ones who teach us about the saving love of God, are the ones in our lives who show us in their suffering how to love and even how to praise God and be of service to others.

Stephen Shoemaker tells the story of such a woman in his book GodStories. Jean Stout was a Kentucky woman who had been disabled all her life. As a young person, she had been too embarrassed about how she looked to be baptized. So, later in life, Stephen baptized her in her nursing home bed. When she was close to death, taking massive doses of medicine to reduce her pain, Stephen was visiting with Jean. She smiled at Stephen and said, *"The only thing that helps me in my pain is liquid morphine. This may sound silly to you pastor, but that morphine is the most beautiful color of blue I have ever seen."* Her improbable praise brought tears to Stephen.

Jean Stout reached a point in her battle for life, in which she said something like this:

God you've been in my actions, you've guided my life, and walked with me through all I have encountered. Now be in my dying, lift me up and carry me in your arms into the heavenly dwelling place that you call home. I can no longer care for my family, Lord. I hate that worse than anything. So, I leave them in your hands in the hands of those who you send as angels of mercy and love. Help them accept your presence in their lives, however you choose to make your love manifest."

I have heard such words at the bedside of your beloved ones through the years.

When such words as this come into the hearts and minds of people, a healing happens. It is a healing deeper than the body which is destined for death, a healing that is a final union with God. From such as these, I have learned not only how to die, but how to live. I have learned how to offer my passion to God as well as my well-intended actions.

At the heart of today's gospel is GOD'S LOVE. This verse tells us that the initiative in all salvation comes from the heart of God.

Listen to this verse, unpacked by phrases and listen to its powerful message of love: "**God so loved . . . God so loved **the world** . . . God so loved the world **that he gave** . . . God so loved the world that he gave **his only son** . . . God so loved the world that he gave his only son, **that whosoever believes in him** ... *God so loved the world that whosoever believes in him shall not perish, but have everlasting life.*"**

Mother Teresa of Calcutta once said of John 3:16 –

"The Good News is that God still loves the world through you. You are God's Good News. You are God's love in action. Each time anyone comes in contact with us, they must become different and better people because of having met us. We must radiate God's love."

God still loves the world and by many accounts, it is not a world that is easy to love. Terror, war, hunger, oppression, and injustice are among those elements of man's inhumanity to man that make this world hard to love. God has to love the world in the face of the world hating God or battling with God. Nevertheless, our God continues to love the world.

God loves the unlovable and the unlovely. God loves the lonely that have no one else to love them. God loves the man who never thinks of God. God loves the woman who lives in God's presence constantly. God loves the graceless and the graceful. God loves the one who has never given a thought to God and knows not how to lift a prayer and the one who seeks God and prays without ceasing. God loves the one who is angry at God and the one who is content in God. God loves the one who spits at God and the one who smiles at God. God loves you, just as God loves me.

As St. Augustine has written, "*God loves each of us as if there was only one of us to love.*"

As we head into the third week of Lent, may we join the ranks of those who risk and resist. May we embrace the promise made to Abram and fulfilled in Jesus the Christ. As we seek Sabbath, may we remember that there will always be Jesus to teach us how to love. Amen.

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