December 6, 2015

Text: Exodus 20:8-11; 31:12-17

“The Lord’s Day”

The other day I read an article about how science was helping Orthodox Jews observe the Sabbath. The religious practice of that community of believers is to avoid any kind of work on the Sabbath. (Some wear slippers so they don’t have to do the work of tying their shoe laces.) Work, for many Orthodox Jews, would include turning the dials on a stove, so all food on the Sabbath has to be eaten cold. One of the manufacturers of stoves devised a timer system; theheat iss set before the Sabbath begins and then automatically turns on during Sabbath time. Thus, one can have a hot meal without having to work a dial on the Sabbath.

Sabbath is intended for the rhythm of life. Breathe in. Breathe out. Maybe one way to honor that rhythm is to see Sabbath as a time for “something different.” If I pretty much lie around all week, would Sabbath be a day to do work? If I go full tilt all the week, would Sabbath be a day to relax? If I am alone most of the week, perhaps Sabbath could be a time to try to connect with people. If I am constantly busy with people, Sabbath could be hours apart, quiet, reflective. If I struggle in causes of social justice all week, for me Sabbath would be a time to stay in touch with my personal relationship with God. If I “major” in my own spiritual journey, Sabbath time could be energy devoted to reaching out to and for others.

Sabbath is God’s gift of shifting gears. No wonder Sabbath is a day of gathered worship.

December 13, 2015

Text: Leviticus 22:17-25, 31-33

“Acceptable Offerings”

Few of us sleep with the Book of Leviticus under our pillow in hopes of osmosis of biblical insight. There are lots of things in this book that we Christians simply ignore: “You must not cut off the hair on your foreheads or clip the ends of your beard” (Leviticus 19:27); “Anyone who hunts any animal or bird that can be eaten...must drain its blood out and cover it with dust” (Leviticus 17:13); “Do not wear clothes made from two kinds of material” (Leviticus 19:19); and verse after verse describing sexual behavior, food consumption, and how to treat your slaves. What are we to do with all of this? After all, God says, “You must keep my commands and do them; I am the Lord” (Leviticus 22:31).

At least three times, Jesus said, “You have heard it said of old...but I say to you...” (or as the Common English Bible translates it “You have heard that it was said to those who lived a long time ago...but I say to you...” (Matthew 5:21, 27, 33)). This follows right on the heels of our Lord’s assurance that we are to obey even the least of the commands of God (Matthew 5:19). So, Jesus, which is it? Do we obey what was said to those folks “back then” or do we obey what you say to us now?

What has not changed from the
December 20, 2015
"Dedication of First-Born"

During these days of Advent, we spend most of our time looking forward, looking ahead to Christmas. It is a time of anticipation. We even sing, "Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus," "All Earth Is Wailing," and "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel." We are on a countdown to the Big Event!

Interestingly enough, our study texts for this week do just the opposite. Instead of looking ahead, they look back. The text from Exodus (Exodus 13:13-15) hinges on remembering how God led the Hebrew people out of Egypt. In fact, the Israelites are told that this is not just a story about "some people" but about "you". This is when "the Lord brought us with great power out of Egypt." Yes!

And then the passage from Luke (Luke 2:22-32) tells about Mary and Joseph looking back to the ritual cleansing required by the Law from Moses. They make this trip to Jerusalem, because they look back to this ceremony that remembered how God released (ransomed) Israel from slavery. Making a sacrifice in behalf of the infant was a way of recalling how God saved the firstborn of the Hebrews (Exodus 12:12-15). Mary and Joseph took Jesus to the temple in Jerusalem for this service that looked back to how God saved God's chosen people.

It is Simon who makes the connection between what has been and what will be. He knew the story and he "eagerly anticipated" (Luke 2:25) the fulfillment of that long journey. When God's Spirit led Simon to the temple while Jesus was there with Mary and Joseph, Simon realized that the past had now come present in order to claim the future! And he expands the story to claim that it is for "all peoples" (v.33) and for both Gentile and Jew (v.32).

So, in this Advent season 2015, we stand with Simon, in one hand grabbing the past of deliverance from slavery in Egypt and in the other hand holding on to the future promised in Christ Jesus. Here we are in the middle between yesterday and tomorrow, and the link is the One whose birthday we prepare to celebrate. The apostle Paul says this Christ is the firstborn of all creation (Colossians 2:15) and the firstborn from the dead (Colossians 2:18). Released, redeemed, in life, in death. That about covers it, doesn't it? Merry Christmas.

What Someone Else Has Said:
Imprisoned Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote Maria von Wedemeyer or (Love Letters from Cell 92, Abingdon):
"A police cell like this, in which one watches and hopes and performs this or that ultimately is a testing task, and in which one is wholly dependent on the door's being opened from outside, is a far from inappropriate metaphor for Advent."

Prayer:
As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: "Come, Holy Spirit, break with fresh vigor upon our casual 'yes' and move us toward radical obedience. In the Lord Jesus, open us to the love that honores Your name as we love our neighbor..."

December 27, 2015
Texts: Matthew 23:2-12, Mark 12:38-44
"A Generous Gift"

Well, I guess we can't accuse the folks who choose these texts for lingering too long in Bethlehem! The Sunday for this lesson is two days after Christmas and we are moving ahead to some of the teachings of Jesus.

In the first of the study verses, Jesus is making a distinction between those who put on airs and those who simply go with the low flow. He illustrates this by referring to those who are extra proud (Matthew 23:5). One conclusion I draw from this is that fake humility is as bad as fake dignity.

In the second study text (Mark 12:38-44), Jesus describes the familiar scene of the widow who put a couple of small coins into the offering plate (probably a trumpet-like container that would echo loudly when large amounts were put in). He contrasted her "all she had" gift with those who gave a little icing off the top of their cake of wealth.

In our eagerness to be fair to everyone, we sometimes slip into an "anything goes" frame of mind. Our Lord has shown that there is a difference in what piques God and what displeases God (Mark 12:40). As Eugene Peterson paraphrases Matthew 23:12: "If you puff yourself up, you'll get the wind knocked out of you. But if you're content to be simply yourself, your life will count for plenty."

This is more than a teaching about financial stewardship. When one joins The United Methodist Church, one promises "pray, presence, gifts, service, and witness." That's a good check list for each of us. It includes financial accountability, but also includes other dimensions of the spiritual journey. The standard to which Jesus points is "don't show off as if what you do is a big deal, but do all that you can do." (That's a very rough translation of a combination of Matthew 23:12 and Mark 12:44)

So, if this poor widow had bragged about how she had given everything she had, it would have voided Jesus' praise of her. Or if she had made sure everyone knew how humble she was about all of this attention, that would have diluted the Lord's celebration of her gift. It's a matter of balance isn't it? And that's hard to do. Maybe that is why our best living and grace is so hard.

What Someone Else Has Said:
Cal and Rose Samaras (More Holy Humor, Goodnews) quote Mary Ann Herman who said when "When it comes to giving, some folks stop at nothing."

Prayer:
As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: "Lord Jesus, take my life and let it be consecrated, Lord, to thee...

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On a Wednesday night our misional community made PB&J. The next day in the August heat, a small gaggle of us took those sandwiches and a cooler of cold water to downtown Fayetteville, handing them out with an invitation to pray for any needs. Some passed, some loved the food and water, but didn’t want prayer. Most were not only grateful for the provisions, but were happy to pray with us.

We knew we were not saving the world. We knew we looked silly. We hoped we were helping. But this was something... and something is better than nothing. It’s a starting point to encounter people at a crossroads in life.

We’ve decided to get out and show up, somewhere... anywhere... because God is everywhere. And I think he is waiting for us to show up.

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