

biblestudy: may 2023

Belton Joyner, Jr.

Based on the scripture lessons of Cokesbury’s Adult Bible Study Series

May 7, 2023 Text: Exodus 20:8-11 “The Sabbath as Communal Practice”

I am writing this on a Friday night around 7:45. In some traditions, Sabbath began when the sun went down a little while ago. In my United Methodist practice, Sabbath won’t start until Sunday morning.

When I was growing up—uh, some time ago!—there were limits to what my family did on Sunday. We did not shop even if needed groceries. We certainly did not go to a movie in the local theater. On Sunday, we could study the Bible, but not our regular school work. Bicycle-riding was off limits. And once my visiting uncle ordered some ice cream on the phone from the local drug store on a Sunday; my father overheard the order and called the drug store and canceled the order.

Is that what Exodus 20:8-11 prescribes? What does it mean to keep something holy?

Holiness is a reflection of the presence of God. Exodus 20:11 reminds us that God “rested” after the work of creation. The text (verse 8) tells us to “remember.” To remember something is to put it together again. Let’s put together again the pattern of work/rest that God showed.

The instruction, the commandment, speaks of Sabbath as a community experience. Even the livestock (v. 10) are to be given a day of rest and recovery. As John Holbert has noted, when we see this commandment

applied to male and female, to servants, to immigrants, to livestock (v. 10), we see the seeds planted for a movement toward equality and for justice.

When the writer of Deuteronomy records this fourth commandment (Deuteronomy 5:12-15), there is a reminder that the Israelites were once slaves in Egypt, but God brought them out (v. 15). The Sabbath becomes a way of recalling that story---work, work, work, work, work, and then rest in the Promised Land. A change in our daily routines is a way to recall the delivery of God’s people from slavery to freedom. No wonder Sabbath observance is a community experience!

Worship. Mission. Life together. Equality. Justice. Community. These seem to be qualities of a well-kept Sabbath.

What Someone Else Has Said:

Karl Barth (*Evangelical Theology*, (Holt, Rinehart, and Winston) wrote: “The purpose of the Sabbath...(is) to obtain for (working days) precisely the light from above which they lack.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Thank You, Lord, for Sabbath...”

May 14, 2023 Text: Psalm 23 “Sabbath as a Palace in Time”

This week’s focal text is one of the most familiar passages in all of the Bible. I’ve heard third graders quote the entire chapter. At funerals, congregations recite it from memory. The United Methodist Hymnal actually carries it twice, in two different translations (# 754—New Revised Standard Version and # 137—King James Version). Which one comes easily to your mind?

There can be a comfort in familiar biblical material, but there can also be a danger. Suppose God has spoken to me in a particular verse; every time I see that verse, God’s message returns, as it always has. But, what if God wants to say something new to me? What if I have missed something God has been saying all along in a text? I need to be careful not to go on automatic pilot when I come to Psalm 23.

Where does Sabbath come alive in Psalm 23?

I am usually running at top speed. God “makes me lie down in green pastures,” (v. 2). In other words, God says “take a break.” Sabbath.

My days usually spin me off in several different directions. The Sabbath God reminds me of what is important (v. 3), the paths of doing right. It is more than just being busy; it is doing what is right.

Both my wife and our only child have died. I get a Sabbath rest from that grief because God walks that valley with me (v. 4). God taps me on the shoulder with his staff and I am reminded that I am not alone.

In the eastern culture in which the psalmist wrote, one could escape an enemy by doing no more than touching the tent of one’s protector. God provides that tent and even serves a meal of hospitality (v. 5). The enemies are still there, but the Sabbath moment gives a foretaste of being in the house of the Lord forever (v. 6).

No wonder the title of this lesson sees Sabbath as a Palace!

What Someone Else Has Said:

The Preface to the Psalms in *The United Methodist Hymnal* (UMPH) says: “At the heart of Judeo-Christian worship and prayer, the psalms express the rich spectrum of human emotions, attitudes, and needs in relation to God, God’s family, and the world.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Good Shepherd, thank You...”

NON PROFIT ORG
US POSTAGE
PAID
RALEIGH, NC
PERMIT #2483

North Carolina Conference
The United Methodist Church
700 Waterfield Ridge Place
Garner, NC 27529

May 21, 2023 Text: Matthew 12:1-14 "Participating in the Sabbath"

The Pharisees wanted every Sabbath to look the same. Jesus had a different notion. In today's focal text, He told of several "variations on the theme," as great leaders (such as David) and religious purists (such as priests) broke Sabbath prohibitions. Sabbath life, Jesus says, is to be determined by the values of the "Son of Man" (Matthew 12:8). The Lord's standards of mercy (v. 7) become the standards for Sabbath-keeping.

Then that same day, when Jesus offered to heal a man with a withered hand, the Pharisees once again got bent out of shape and accused Him of violating the Sabbath. Our Lord summed up His view: "It is lawful to do good on the Sabbath" (v. 12).

The truth is that for many of us the issue is no longer what is allowed on the Sabbath. We do most anything we want to do. In so doing, we may well be blocking some of the Sabbath-gift that God would give us.

What gifts are we missing because we do not observe Sabbath? Jesus said that the Sabbath was made as a gift for us; we were not created to be servants of the Sabbath (Mark 2:27). And the writer of Hebrews says, "So then, a Sabbath rest still remains for the people of God" (Hebrews 4:9). The Sabbath is not to be a burden, but to be received and

enjoyed as a gift.

The discipline of "keeping the Sabbath" is the kind of discipline that strengthens us. Compare it to regular trips to the gym. All those push-ups and lifted weights give us the strength to meet physical needs. Regular observance of the Sabbath equips us to be able--even on a Sunday--to do what God calls us to do.

Rather than being a limit on our lives, Sabbath-keeping frees us to new strengths and values for the living of these days. A well-kept Sabbath is one that is holy ("Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy" Exodus 20:8). Holiness of living is the standard by which a Sabbath is measured.

We are called to live Sabbath as Jesus did.

What Someone Else Has Said:

In his *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament* (Allenson), John Wesley wrote about the Sabbath: "That is, when they (mercy and sacrifice) interfere with each other, I always prefer acts of mercy."

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: "Lord Jesus, let me measure my Sabbath-keeping by You..."

May 28, 2023 Luke 4:16-21 "Celebrating the Sabbath"

Tucked away in Luke 4: 16 is a simple phrase that tells us a lot about Jesus: "...he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath, as was His custom." *As was His custom.*

Isn't it interesting that when Jesus was ready to announce His ministry (Luke 4:15-21), He did so in an ordinary Sabbath gathering in the small town synagogue in Nazareth! (If I had been asked to write the story, I think I would have waited for a high holy day at the downtown temple in Jerusalem.) God, Who became flesh in Jesus (John 1:14), so often did His sacred work in commonplace places.

How often have you read of (or yourself experienced) some extraordinary spiritual gift in just an everyday setting? John Wesley's Aldersgate experience was at a routine prayer meeting he did not really even want to attend. Billy Graham marked his journey to conversion at a revival he went to because he thought some of his friends were going to try to interrupt the gathering. I made my own commitment to ministry while filling out a college application form. Our remarkable God shows up in the unexpected and seemingly ordinary settings.

Let me share a personal story. I was the guest preacher at a church while the pastor was on vacation. I only knew a couple of people in the congregation and I preached what I thought was a sort of ho-hum sermon. As folks came out the door after the service, they gave the

usual "thank you's" and "come again sometime." A man I did not know stepped up to me. He paused and then said, "Thank you for the sermon. It has changed my life." I sputtered something like, "I'm glad," and he added, "No, I really mean it. God meant for me to be here today." He gave me a hug and walked to the door.

That's one reason to observe the Sabbath, even the routine Sabbath. Let's go on Sunday with the awareness that those week-after-week--sitting in the same pew--smiling at the same people--listening to the same preacher---settings are just the place for an incarnated God to show up.

After all, it was Jesus' custom to do so.

What Someone Else Has Said:

Hymn 659 in *The United Methodist Hymnal* (UMPH) says: "Jesus, our friend and brother. Jesus, our friend and brother. He invites us; He invites us. Come together, come together. Jesus call us together, come now."

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: "Touch this Sabbath..."

For the LORD gives wisdom; From His mouth come knowledge and understanding; He stores up sound wisdom for the upright; He is a shield to those who walk uprightly; He guards the paths of justice, And preserves the way of His saints. Proverbs 2:6-BNKJV

Listen to the Bible Study Online

Recordings of Belton reading each bible study are available online.

If you are viewing a printed version of this publication, type <https://nccumc.fm/gods-gift-of-scripture/> into the search bar of your internet browser (Chrome, Firefox, Microsoft Edge, etc.) to listen to the podcasts.

If you are viewing this publication in PDF format, Click here to listen to Bible Study podcasts!

Happy Mother's Day!

Thank you for patience, courage, kindness, and unconditional love.

Love from your children.



Annual Conference 2023
June 14- June 17

Annual Conference 2023 will meet at the Greenville Convention Center (303 SW Greenville Blvd., Greenville, NC 27834). This year's theme is Graceful Hospitality.

Download the Conference app.

Stay connected to AC and more with the NC Conference app for mobile devices: <https://nccumc.org/app/>