

Well, as I said earlier: it is so good to be back here with you all. 😊 Whether or not you missed me, please know that I missed you! Actually, one of my kids did tell me last Sunday, “Dad, they’re really looking forward to having you back.” True or not...that was sweet to hear and I’m grateful for it.

There is so much I want to say this morning and I want to say it all at once. But, like any other Sunday, this isn’t really about what *I’ve* got to say, but what *God* is saying to you and to me through the passage we’re looking at. Now, today’s passage very much connects to my Sabbatical and will open the door for me to share with you some of my experiences and things I’ve learned and areas I hope to continue growing in as a result of these last three months. But my hope is that in doing that, God will both challenge and encourage you in your own journey of faith as you seek to live like Jesus. So, let’s turn to **Exodus 23:10-12** for our passage this morning, and then go from there. This is God’s Word to us today...

**As many of are probably aware, the sabbath is commanded and discussed a lot in Scripture.** Both the Old Testament and the New Testament. It is rooted in the 7-day Creation account, where God rests on the 7<sup>th</sup> day, and then taking a weekly sabbath is one of the 10 commandments. In the New Testament, we see a lot of critique – mostly from Jesus – about the rules around sabbath that had been established over the centuries (orally passed on, then written starting in Jesus’ day – called the Talmud) to ensure that people actually stopped their work and engaged in the sabbath day appropriately. Jesus’ critique is, in a nutshell, that Jewish leaders had become completely legalistic about the sabbath, and imposed such restrictions on people that the day lost its joy and its true meaning. It became about what you “can’t do” rather than what you can. Now, sabbath comes from the Hebrew word, Shabbat, and it primarily means “to stop.” And you were supposed to stop work, for the purpose of simply being in the presence of God and his people for a day. No distractions. It was a day to be rejuvenated in one’s relationship with God, and with other people in your life,

particularly your immediate family, but beyond that as well – all in the context of relationship with God.

Instead, however, with all the extra the rules that got created about what you couldn't do, the sabbath was like stopping all of life. Like trying to tiptoe through a minefield, hoping you didn't step in the wrong place and do something you shouldn't do and blow up the sabbath day with a “shame on you” because of some inconsequential rule you broke. But that wasn't God's intent. **We see the intent of the weekly sabbath in the last word of today's passage, “refreshed.”** It was a day to be refreshed. To engage God, to be with His people, and to find rest and refreshment there. And, Jesus gets us back to what the sabbath was for: that it was made for humans, not humans for the sabbath. The sabbath is here to serve us, not us to serve the sabbath and a bunch of rules around it. So, Jesus gives freedom from legalism in the sabbath, but we've taken that freedom much too far, and the sabbath has been lost in our culture. We reward people who work 70 hours in a week. I heard one pastor say a couple years ago in a series of talks on “sabbath” that the sabbath is the one commandment out of the ten commandments that pastors are commended and rewarded by their churches for breaking.

This sabbath breaking and sabbath avoidance is unfortunate, because ultimately, Jesus is our sabbath. He is our rest. All who are weary and heavy laden come to him and find rest – in this life, and in the life to come. It's an eternal rest that we have in him, an eternal Sabbath. **When we take a sabbath the way we're supposed to, it's like we're preparing ourselves for the eternal sabbath we will experience in Jesus on the other side of the grave.** So, sabbath is a Biblical command that Jesus ultimately fulfills in an eternal kind of way, that we are to practice here and now.

There's a second component of sabbath that we see in the first couple verses we read this morning. It's an “every seven years” sabbath that lets the land recover from the farming, and also blesses the poor among them and even the wild animals around them. There are elements of Creation care here – stewardship of the earth, letting the land lie fallow and recover for a season of time, letting wild animals have access to the land for a season of time as

well. There also is a strong element of caring for the poor. It's a season of time where they can freely get food from the crop fields.

**But: This once every seven years break from farming was a kind of sabbath.** It is this model that has led to the idea of a Sabbatical, such as I took this summer. Frequently, pastors will take Sabbaticals every seven years, based in part on this passage and others with the same message. It's too bad God didn't command them to let the land lie fallow every three or four years...but seven is good. I've been in ministry as a pastor 22 years this fall, 12 of them here at Rose Hill, and this is the first Sabbatical I've ever taken. I fully realize there are many of you here who have worked (or did work) longer than that, and you never got a sabbatical. I don't take this for granted, and I don't in any way feel that I deserved it or am entitled to it. I'm very aware that some of you probably broke the 10<sup>th</sup> commandment because of me: "You shall not covet." I'm your pastor and I've led some of you into sin, almost certainly! But, I'm thankful that the leaders of this church (and the congregation as a whole) had the foresight to put in the terms of a Sabbatical for the head pastor before I arrived (and the previous pastor had a couple sabbaticals in his 25+ years as pastor), and that I got to be blessed by that this summer. My hope is that in some way our church will be blessed by it as well.

As some of you know, I tried taking this Sabbatical a couple times in previous years, but it didn't pan out. Covid didn't help. **In the end, I'm glad those plans didn't work out. I believe it was all in God's timing.** The elements of my sabbatical were exactly what I needed, rather than doing things I'd originally planned that were similar to what other pastors did – like overseas travel with their families and some other really big-ticket things that required outside funding – that quite frankly made me tired just thinking about. What I did was perfect, and I think all in God's providence.

So, before I left, I shared some of the kinds of things I had planned for the Sabbatical, but now that it's over, I'm sure many of you, or at least one of you, though probably more than that...are wondering what I did and what I learned and how it's impacted me. **How has God been tilling the dirt of my life and making me better dirt through this sabbatical experience, as I**

**preached in my last sermon?** (Parable of the sower, though really a parable about us, represented in the quality of the dirt.) So, let me cover some of the highlights, and maybe something here will speak to you as something God could use to till the dirt of your life as well in some kind of sabbath.

The first couple weeks I actually spent sermon planning for today through next Labor Day Weekend. I take a week each summer and plan sermons out like that (Scripture passages, themes), and it was one thing that the Elders and I talked about and I just felt I couldn't set that piece aside and do some other time; not having that done was going to stress me out throughout the sabbatical. But instead of one week, I took it at a more relaxed pace and spread it out over two weeks. As a result, all the sermons this year will be twice as long. 😂

In that time, however, I did also start reading the first of seven books I read throughout the summer. The books were, in many ways, the centerpiece of the Sabbatical, and what took most of the time for me to engage with, process, and help me get re-set in my journey with Jesus. These books are where I believe long-term transformation in my life will come from. Here's what I read, in the order I read them:

- 1. Sacred Rhythms: Arranging our Lives for Spiritual Transformation, by Ruth Haley Barton;**
- 2. Practicing the Way: Be With Jesus, Become Like Him, Do as He Did, by John Mark Comer;**
- 3. A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Discipleship in an Instant Society by Eugene Peterson;**
- 4. The Practice of the Presence of God, by Brother Lawrence;**
- 5. Life is Hard, God is Good, Let's Dance, by Brant Hansen;**
- 6. The Knowledge of the Holy, by A.W. Tozer;**
- 7. The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry, by John Mark Comer.**

Every one of these books challenged and encouraged me, and I would recommend any of them to you. One or two or more will end up as sermon material or a discipleship class, though that was not my goal in reading them. Several, as you can probably tell from the titles, are around cultivating a deeper sense of discipleship to Jesus, and establishing a more disciplined

approach to following Jesus. They gave me a swift kick in the rear in regards to my practice of spiritual disciplines, because I needed a swift kick in the rear.

**A second significant component of the Sabbatical was going to a marriage Conference with Gwen.** It was near Phoenix, in Scottsdale, during the last few days of June. Fortunately, it was in between significant heat waves there, and our daytime highs were only in the 101-105 range. The conference was put on by Family Life Today – a Christian organization with similar kinds of ministries as Focus on the Family. It’s called “A Weekend to Remember” and I would encourage any married couple to attend one if you haven’t – they do run some of them here in Western Washington at different times of the year, so you can do one without the expense of travelling far. Anyway, it was a time of worship, teaching sessions, and a lot of time for Gwen and me to talk through a bunch of things using their curriculum as a guide for our conversations. There was more to the weekend, but most of that is confidential. 😊

**A third component was a week-long Summer Conference at Cannon Beach Christian Conference Center.** Three of our kids joined us for this. It was an incredible week of worship, Bible teaching, kids and youth ministry, fellowship, and recreation that drew each of us closer to God and to each other. I can’t recommend it enough. Get on the waitlist for a week next summer now if you want to consider going.

Lastly, I took a four-day, three-night silent retreat where I read parts of a couple of the books, but mostly spent time in prayer and reflection on my Sabbatical, and really tried to listen to God about **“How is this Sabbatical not just going to rejuvenate me now, but put me on a better course of following Jesus a month, six months, six years, or more, from now?”** This was a time of planning and mapping some things out so that come September, my Sabbatical would not just fade away in the rearview mirror. I mentioned a moment ago that the timing and the content of this Sabbatical was perfect for me, and I think completely orchestrated by God. This little retreat is a great example.

Gwen's mom (Rose) came to our house on a Thursday late morning to be with us for a few days. And after she got there, Gwen (?) suggested I should go out to her mom's house at Ocean Shores for a silent retreat. We'd talked about a silent retreat being part of the sabbatical, but hadn't really figured out where or how to do it. Rose was happy to give me the key to her house, so off I went just a few hours after she arrived. When I got there, I happened to notice that for the day of my arrival on her wall calendar she had written "Visitor." She came to our house not knowing I was going to be staying the night at her house. I called and asked her about it, partly because if someone was going to be knocking on her front door expecting Rose to be there, I wanted to be ready...but she had no idea what that had been about. That's a predestined, God-ordained retreat, if you ask me – it was even on her calendar.

So, here's what I think God would have me say to you as a final word of encouragement in light of the sabbath commandment and my experience this summer: **Take time to stop the parts of life that are busy and hurried, and just be with God.** I know a lengthy sabbatical is not likely for most of us, but most of us can get a week or two of vacation, or an extended weekend. And rather than a trip to Vegas or Disneyland or some other tourist trap where our culture of consumerism continues to come at you at a frantic pace and you come home more tired than when you left (ever have that happen?): consider making a vacation an extended sabbath, a time intentionally spent getting spiritually refreshed. A week, or even a weekend can go a long way. A Christian conference, a prayer retreat, an extended time of reading Scripture... any of the books I read, or some other book that will enrich you spiritually. There are so many possibilities.

And take a sabbath, a day each week to truly stop what you're doing the rest of the week – and just rest in God, to engage in activities that feed your soul. Spiritual disciplines like prayer and reading the Bible but also hobbies and activities you enjoy whether that's knitting or hiking or surfing or whatever...things that get you off the internet and away from the TV...doing things that energize you and help you get reconnected to the God of the Universe who made you, loves you, has come to you in the person of Jesus and dwells in you by the Holy Spirit. **Anything you can do on a sabbath so**

**God can till the dirt in your life is going to be good for your soul.** It's going to be good for your walk with Jesus, who truly is your place of sabbath rest.

And so I encourage you to make sure you're getting your weekly sabbath. If even *that* sounds impossible (let alone a little longer extended sabbath), then start by reading the book, "The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry." And don't speed read it, for crying out loud. Don't listen to it on Audible on double speed. Read it over the course of a few weeks, and see if you aren't challenged and encouraged to prioritize the sabbath in your life. Because there's a sacred rhythm to life that God has created you and me to experience, and getting that rest so we can re-center in him, is such a foundational element of that. So, take your sabbath each week, and find your ultimate refreshment in Jesus. Let's Pray...Amen.