

**Pentecost 2 / June 2, 2024**  
**Deuteronomy 5:12**  
**“Observe the Sabbath day to keep it holy.”**

**The Sabbath Day**

The Sabbath was the most prominent expression of the faith of Israel in contrast to the religions of the ancient near east. The Sabbath was a weekly day of rest from the labours of life and the work of the week. No other people in the ancient near east took a day each week to rest. Israel alone of the nations took a day each week to worship the Lord and to rest in His peace. The word ‘Sabbath’ means both ‘rest’ and the number ‘seven.’ In our text from Deuteronomy, Sabbath is associated with the rest from slavery Israel received when the Lord redeemed them from bondage in Egypt; showing His power over Pharaoh, his gods through ten plagues and the forces of nature by parting the Red Sea. Moses says, “You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm.” Every Sabbath Israel remembered their servitude in Egypt, their rescue, gave thanks and rested in the peace of the Lord. On the Lord’s Day we remember Jesus. He redeemed us from slavery to sin, servitude to the devil and the condemnation of death. We rest in His peace.

In Deuteronomy the Sabbath is connected with redemption from slavery in Egypt. In Exodus, the Sabbath is connected with the creation of the heavens, the earth and all that is in them. At Mount Sinai the Lord met with Israel. He gave them the Sabbath as their day of rest. He said, “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy...For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore, the Lord blessed the Sabbath and made it holy.” The Lord made Israel His people at Mount Sinai in the covenant mediated through Moses. The Lord gave Israel the commandments which would inform their relationship with Him and by which they would express their devotion to Him. Every Sabbath Israel remembered the Lord was the God of creation and their Redeemer from slavery. The Lord was the God of creation and the God of their salvation. They rested in His peace!

Both of these inform our understanding of the Sabbath and our lives in Christ. Slavery was part of life in the ancient near east. The strong enslaved the weak. The forces of nature were a threat, displaying a battle between the forces of creation and chaos. Everyone was in danger of destruction should chaos prevail. Israel had no reason to fear a more powerful people or the forces of nature. They rested in the Lord’s peace. Because Israel rested in the Lord, they could afford to take a day each week away from their daily labours. Because Israel rested in the Lord, they could rest assured the Lord would protect them from the forces of nature and the forces of evil in the world. In our gospel, Jesus claimed Lordship over the Sabbath as the Son of God. The Sabbath leads us to Jesus. He is our peace in the midst of the uncertainty of life and the fear of death. He gives us peace in relationship with the heavenly Father through the sacrifice of His cross. He calls, “Come to me all you who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest.” Jesus is our Sabbath rest. We rest in His peace.

There were many things in Israel’s worship that set them apart from the religions of the ancient near east. The most visible was the Sabbath. Like the nations around them, Israel sacrificed to their God and built a temple for that purpose. The temple and the sacrifices were important, but long after the temple was destroyed and the sacrifices abolished, the Sabbath remained. Israel took the Sabbath with them into exile among the nations. The nations whom they served may not have allowed them a day to rest from their labours as the Lord allowed in the Promised Land; but every Sabbath they could meditate on the word of the Lord, which really was the heart of the Sabbath. The Sabbath was a day to hear the words of the Lord. The Sabbath was a day to meditate on the Lord’s words, ponder their meaning and to consider how to apply them to one’s life. The Sabbath was a day to cease from labour in order to devote oneself more fully to the teaching of the Lord and the promise of salvation in His Holy Word.

The significance of the Sabbath is not the day, which according to the biblical week is Saturday. The significance of the Sabbath is the rest which God’s people enjoy every day in Him, particularly our rest in Christ Jesus. In our gospel the Pharisees chastise Jesus for allowing His disciples to pluck heads of grain to eat on the Sabbath, which was considered labour. Jesus rebuked them for their insensitivity to human need and blindness to the meaning of scripture. The Pharisees’ problem was they put more emphasis on the rules of the Sabbath than on the significance of the Sabbath as resting in God’s peace. In fact, they made so many rules for Sabbath observance that the day became a burden rather than a blessing. Jesus first reminded them of how David violated the law

regarding holy bread, not out of disrespect but out of urgent need. God created humans before He created the Sabbath. God created the Sabbath for the sake of humans rather than the other way around. The Sabbath is a day to worship the Lord, hear His word and apply it to our lives. The Sabbath is the rest we have every day with God through Christ Jesus. He is our Sabbath rest. In Him we have peace with God in the forgiveness of sin.

The Sabbath was the high day of worship in the covenant of Mount Sinai. It was the high day, not the only day. Every day was a day to worship the Lord and to remember Him as the Creator of heaven and earth and as the Redeemer of His people from slavery and death. There is no high day in the Covenant God made new and extends to all people in Christ Jesus. Jewish Christians continued to worship on Saturday well into the Christian era, also celebrating Jesus' resurrection on Sunday. As the Christian Church became distinct from Judaism because of its faith that Jesus is the Christ, Sunday worship became more prominent. Not by divine command, but by custom. Sunday as the day of Jesus' Resurrection, became the high day of Christian worship. Each week on the first day of creation, Christians celebrate, remember and look forward to the recreation that is in Christ Jesus.

The day we chose to worship is less important than who we worship. In the letter to the Colossians, as people debated the significance of rituals and special days in the Mount Sinai Covenant, St. Paul said, "Let no one pass judgement on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. These are a shadow of things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ." His point being that all the rituals, festivals and special days of the Mount Sinai Covenant, including the Sabbath, lead us to Christ, the sacrifice of His cross and His resurrection from the dead. He is our Sabbath rest. Every day in Christ is a Sabbath. We rest in His peace. In our place Jesus fulfilled the demands of the law, which never gives rest or peace to those who try to keep it and fulfill its demands. The law demands perfect obedience. Jesus fulfilled its demands. We rest in His peace. The law shows our sins, but it doesn't offer us forgiveness. So the saying goes, 'There is no rest for the wicked.' Jesus gives forgiveness through the blood of His cross, received by baptism into His dying and rising, and faith in His Name. Jesus calls us to Himself that we may rest in His peace. Jesus is our Sabbath rest.

We observe the Sabbath by resting in the peace of Christ our Saviour. We keep the Sabbath by returning to the promise of our baptism in confession, repentance and absolution. We honour the Sabbath by receiving the sacred meal of holy communion, believing that Jesus' body and blood are present in the bread and in the wine for our spiritual nourishment, forgiveness and refreshment. We remember the Sabbath by meditating upon God's word, following it as a lamp leading us to the feet of Jesus our Saviour. We observe the Sabbath every day, by setting apart in our hearts Jesus as Lord, taking time to pray, praise and give thanks. Regardless of the day, the Sabbath is taking time to join Mary of Bethany, who before preparing a meal, set herself down to listen to Jesus, feasting first on His words. Humans were not made for the Sabbath. The Sabbath was made for humans that through the hearing of the word the Spirit would lead us to Jesus and open our hearts to receive His peace. He is our Sabbath rest. We rest in His peace. In His Name. Amen