

“Set Free”  
Deuteronomy 5:12-15  
Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost

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Westminster, Greenville  
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Did any of you figure out what the topic is for today?  
Sabbath, that’s right.  
What do Presbyterians believe about the sabbath?

In a day when everyone is always plugged in, always on their iPhone, always accessible by text or email...what does keeping sabbath look like?

I’m going to date myself a bit by asking you this, but I’ll do it anyway: who here remembers the movie, “Chariots of Fire”?

It won the Oscar after it was released in 1981.  
It told the story of two Olympic athletes:  
Eric Liddell and Harold Abrahams.

*As the movie tells it, Liddell was boarding a boat to the 1924 Paris Olympics when he discovered that the qualifying heats for his event, the 100-meter sprint, were scheduled for a Sunday.*

*[Liddell was a] devout Christian, he refused to run on the Sabbath so he switched to the 400 meter race. The press roundly criticized the Scotsman and called his decision unpatriotic, but Liddell[prevailed].*

He won that 400-meter race in world-record time.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> [Harold Abrahams and Eric Liddell: Chariots of Fire | 1924 Olympics, British Athletes | Britannica](#)

Now that happened 100 years ago.  
 Can you imagine anyone making that kind of decision today?  
 Forgoing your dream...because of the sabbath?

I'll date myself even further with this question:  
 How many people here remember the days of "blue laws"?  
 Or maybe I should ask: how many of our younger generations even  
 know what blue laws were?

They were laws for a community that shut down particular forms  
 of commerce and activity on Sundays. They are almost non-existent  
 now, but there is at least one place in the country that still follows them,  
 and you'll never guess where it is located:

Not in Utah, not in the Bible Belt.  
 Bergen County, New Jersey, right across from NY City!

The leadership of Bergen County argues that there is no religious  
 reason for what they do. It's simply what the community wants. They  
 describe what they do as a way to "catch your breath"...the last time  
 they voted on the measure, it passed by a 12-1 margin!<sup>2</sup>

But never mind blue laws.  
 What do Presbyterians believe about the sabbath?  
 Is it as simple as going to church on Sunday?

What happens when your child has a baseball tournament or a  
 dance competition?

Or what happens when just the thought of getting your family  
 ready for church leaves you even more exhausted, and all you want to do  
 on Sunday is sleep in?

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<sup>2</sup> As told in Part 1 of Martin Doblmeier's documentary, "Sabbath," found at [Sabbath | PBS](#).

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Before we get to any of those questions, let's take a look at what the Bible says about sabbath. There are two places where the 10 commandments appear in the Good Book.

Do you know where those places are?

The first place is in the book of Exodus.

Keeping sabbath is the 4<sup>th</sup> commandment, and the reason for resting on the 7<sup>th</sup> day goes like this:

“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.”

In other words, sabbath goes back to the creation story.

We are created in the image of God.

According to Exodus, God rested on the 7<sup>th</sup> day...so should we.

That's the first time the 10 commandments appear.

And the second place is...the 5<sup>th</sup> chapter of Deuteronomy.

And what's fascinating about this text is that while the commandment to keep the sabbath is the same, the RATIONALE is different.

Listen:

“Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy...

“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; therefore...keep the sabbath day.”

Did you catch the difference?

In the book of Deuteronomy, the reason to keep the sabbath is NOT that God rested on the 7<sup>th</sup> day.

The reason is that God SAVED the Israelites from slavery.  
Because in Egypt, the Israelites belonged to Pharaoh.  
And in Pharaoh's brickyard, there was no rest.

It was work harder, work faster, work until you drop...and if you die while you're working, we'll just replace you with another...that's the economy and the cruelty of Pharaoh.

But God said to the Israelites, that is NOT who you are!  
You are not slaves.  
You are my beloved children.  
You do not belong to Pharaoh...you belong to me!

So God saved the Israelites from Pharaoh.  
God set the Israelites free.

And keeping the sabbath was the way that Israel would remember their true identity, that they belonged to God.

**It was the way they recalled who they are,  
and whose they are,  
and who God created them to be.**

So maybe the first question we need to ask today is not what it looks like to keep the sabbath in our day and time. That's an important question, but it's not the first question.

The first question is this:  
Where are the Pharaohs in your life?  
What's holding you in bondage?

What is it that's keeping you from being the child of God whom God has created you to be?

Back in 1973, well before the Internet and social media, two social psychologists wanted to explore ethical behavior toward a stranger in distress.

So they went to Princeton Seminary because they wanted to work with people who were familiar with the parable of the Good Samaritan.

So they took some students and they asked some of them to write a sermon about the parable.

They sent them over to another building to preach their sermon. And they divided the students into thirds.

They told one third of the students to get to the building really fast because they were late. They told another third of the students that they weren't late but they better not dawdle. And they told the last third of the students that they had plenty of time to get to the building.

Along the way, as they were going to the building, they passed someone slumped against a wall in very obvious distress. And the study was intended to find out who would stop to help that stranger.

What they found is that the students who stopped were the ones who had plenty of time. Some of the ones who were on time but shouldn't dawdle did stop, some didn't.

The ones who were in a rush did not stop.

And the psychologists concluded that helping the stranger wasn't a factor of personality. And it wasn't a factor of cultural conditioning. And it wasn't whether they were familiar with the good Samaritan story.

It was how fast they felt they had to go.  
It was the time they believed they did or did not have.

And those psychologists came to the conclusion that "ethics becomes a luxury as the speed of our daily life increases."<sup>3</sup>

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That was 50 YEARS AGO!  
Think of how much faster life is today.

With the speed at which life comes at you these days,  
the pressures that the world puts on you,  
or the fears and worries that threaten to consume you—  
how many of you have ever felt RUSHED,  
worried that you would not have enough time?

And you FORGOT, at that moment—  
who you are, and whose you are,  
and who God created you to be?

That's why keeping sabbath is not an antiquated practice.  
It's a very necessary spiritual discipline for our day.

Years ago, the late Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote a book that became a spiritual classic, titled simply, *The Sabbath*.

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<sup>3</sup> There are many descriptions of this experiment that can be found on the Internet. I first learned of it in Martin Doblmeier's documentary, "Sabbath."

In that book, Heschel talks about the great cathedrals that have been built in so many different places. How many of you have ever been to a great cathedral before?

The beauty of that space.  
The sacredness of that space.

In his book, Heschel describes the sabbath as a cathedral in time.

He writes:

“The meaning of the Sabbath is to celebrate time rather than space.

“[The person] who wants to enter the holiness of the day must first lay down the profanity of clattering commerce...must go away from the screech of dissonant days, from the nervousness of acquisitiveness and the betrayal in embezzling his own life....

“Six days a week we wrestle with the world...on the Sabbath we especially care for the seed of eternity planted in the soul.”

“Six days a week we live under the tyranny of things of space;  
on the Sabbath we try to become attuned  
to *holiness in time*....”<sup>4</sup>

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I LOVE that way of thinking about sabbath.  
It’s about observing God’s holiness in time.  
It’s about how we use the gift of time that God has given us.

Sabbath means rest, to be sure.

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<sup>4</sup> Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath*, New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1951.

As the commandment in Exodus tells us, God rested on the 7<sup>th</sup> days...so should we.

And I was tempted to tell all of you—  
     go home and take a nap—  
     shorter sermon than usual this week—  
                                     and then say Amen.

But keeping sabbath is more than rest.  
 Keeping sabbath is also...remembering.

**It's the discipline of setting aside sacred time:  
     to REMEMBER who we are,  
     and whose we are, and who God created us to be.**

It's about encountering Almighty God in the holiness of time—  
 even when the place we find ourselves looks nothing like the Divine.

Getting back to Eric Liddell, do you know what happened to him?

After the 1924 Olympic games, Liddell went to China and became a missionary, like his parents before him. But when World War II broke out years later, he was captured by the Japanese army and placed in one of their internment camps in China.

Liddell died in that Japanese prison camp in 1945.

Years later, his grown daughter Patricia went to visit the place where her father lost his life. She met a Chinese official there, and the official spoke to her about her dad. She learned a couple things about her father:

1. "...my father was known in the camp as 'Uncle Eric' because he was so selfless in his concern for others.



2. He was also offered a chance to return home as part of a prisoner exchange, but reportedly turned it down and gave his place to a woman [who was expecting a child] instead.”<sup>5</sup>

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Can I put it like this?

Eric Liddell, in a God-awful place, knew about the holiness of time. In that internment camp, Eric Liddell remembered...

**who he was,  
and whose he was,  
and who God created him to be.**

It's a remarkable thing when you hear about someone like that. Someone who remembers who and whose they are, no matter the place they find themselves in...

Sometimes, that act of remembering can be a risky act. Sometimes it can even be a REBELLIOUS act.

That's what sabbath is about—  
an act of rest...  
an act of remembering...  
even an act of rebellion against the Pharaohs of your life.

I recall what Howard Thurman wrote about his grandmother.

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<sup>5</sup> "Eric Liddell, the Lost Olympian," by Angela Levin, [www.telegraph.co.uk/news/features/3637689/Eric-Liddell-the-lost-Olympian.html](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/features/3637689/Eric-Liddell-the-lost-Olympian.html).

The late Howard Thurman attributed much of his own sense of dignity and vocation to his grandmother, who had been born into slavery.

Thurman, you may recall, was—  
     in a previous generation—  
     dean of the chapel at Boston University,  
     and the first Black professor at that institution.

He was a mentor and counselor to the leaders of the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s.

When Thurman remembered his grandmother, he recalled how she would sometimes tell stories from her time in slavery, and she often told the story of a preacher she would periodically hear.

Every so often, the owner of the plantation—the person who held Howard’s grandmother and so many others captive in that cruel and evil institution—he would allow all those whom he held in slavery to have a worship service, by themselves.

And one from among them would preach.  
 It was always the same person, said his grandmother.

And when this preacher ended his sermons,  
     he always ended them the same way, every time.

He would look at everyone gathered there, and he would say:

“You are NOT slaves...  
     you are God’s children!”

Thurman recalls that “when my grandmother said that [to me], she would unconsciously straighten up, head high and chest out, and a faraway look would come on her face.

“Now that transmitted an idiom to me.  
It gave me my identity...”<sup>6</sup>

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That’s what sabbath does.  
It gives us our identity.

It occurs to me that even though we’ve covered a lot of ground in this sermon, I didn’t really answer all the questions that I posed in the beginning of this sermon.

- I didn’t tell you how you’re supposed to observe the sabbath if your child has a sporting event on Sunday.
- I didn’t tell you what to do when church just feels exhausting to you.
- I didn’t give you a formula that says, do this, don’t do that, because that’s what Presbyterians believe about the sabbath.

Because the truth is, I think keeping sabbath can look a bit different for every Presbyterian in this room.

It means church.  
But it means more than church.

It means something like this...

You are not your frantic busyness.

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<sup>6</sup> One version of Thurman’s telling of this story appears in his book, *With Head and Heart: The Autobiography of Howard Thurman*, New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1979. The above quote comes from a source now forgotten.

And you are not your job.

You are not your demons.

And you are not your loneliness.

And you are not your illness.

And you are not your broken family.

And you are not your past mistakes.

And you are not even your greatest success.

You are God's treasure, God's DELIGHT.

So set aside some sacred time today, or find some holiness in time later this week.

Use that time to remember who you are, and whose you are,  
and who God created you to be...

Amen.