

Escaping Space, Entering Time

Exodus 20:1-17

Sermon by Dan Schrock

June 28, 2015

Then God spoke all these words: I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me.

You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.

Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. 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.

Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.

You shall not murder.

You shall not commit adultery.

You shall not steal.

You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

Keeping the Sabbath is one of the most difficult commandments to observe. Some of the other Ten Commandments are much easier easy to keep, at least for most people I know. Most of us have never murdered anyone; most of us don't steal things; and most of us tell the truth about our neighbors.

For me, and I think for many of you too, it's hard to "remember the sabbath and keep it holy." The Sabbath is so hard to keep partly because many of us are as busy as bees. In an effort to accomplish as much as possible, we work seven days a week. Our Mennonite ethic of hard work feeds right into this. So does our ethic of serving others in the name of Christ. We work long hours because it makes us feel like good Christians.

Busyness aside, I think there's another reason it's hard for us to keep the Sabbath. It's this: even when we do take a Sabbath, we're not sure what we're supposed to be doing, or not doing, on the Sabbath. Which activities are appropriate for the Sabbath? Which aren't? How do we figure this out?

Fifty years ago among Mennonites this wasn't much of a problem. Fifty years ago it was probably easier for us to observe the Sabbath. Many people in broader society rested on Sunday, making it easier for us Mennonites to rest too. Since most businesses were closed on Sundays, it was easier for us to refrain from buying and selling. A half century ago we had to make a real effort to take our work home with us on the weekends. Personal computers, the Internet, email, and smart phones were not available in those days, so the only way people could bring work home was if they physically carried objects home with them. If you wanted to finish a report for Monday, you had to take the report home with you and write it out long-hand or type it on your home typewriter, assuming you actually had a typewriter at home. All that has changed. Thanks to cloud storage and mobile devices, employees can now work remotely at home just as easily as if they were in the office. Some of us even work remotely from vacation spots. These social and technological shifts make it harder for us to keep the Sabbath. Paradoxically, it takes real effort for us *not* to work on the Sabbath.

Of course most of us know that a major part of Sabbath is not working. Exodus 20:8-10 is both clear and specific: on the Sabbath "you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns." To put that into contemporary language: on the Sabbath we, everyone in our family, all our employees, and all immigrants in our country should stop working. On the day of Sabbath we rest. Period.

Even though the commandment is clear, the application is sometimes fuzzy. Suppose that during Sabbath I halt all the work I do the other six days of the week.

That means I stay away from my work email and maybe also my personal email. I do not make any work-related phone calls. I do not read or write any document related to my job. I do not meet with any of my colleagues to discuss work. So far so good.

But that still doesn't help me figure out what I *can* do on the Sabbath. What kinds of activities are *appropriate* for the Sabbath? One thing I did last summer during the sabbatical you all so kindly gave me was to read about and practice the Sabbath. A small book by Abraham Joshua Heschel significantly changed how I think about Sabbath.¹ Heschel says that six days a week—that is, during the days of work—we live in the world of space, but on Sabbath we slip into the world of time.

Think about it this way. For six days a week we invest our energies into the physical world of space and objects. At home, we mow our grass, rake our leaves, and tidy up our gardens. Inside the house, we wash and clean, fix a leaky faucet, or paint a room. We balance our checkbooks and manage our investments. We shop for groceries and clothes. We get the oil changed in our car. All of these things focus on the world of objects in space—they are about houses, gardens, money, and cars. If we were all farmers, the same principle would apply: for six days a week we would work with crops, machinery, tools, and animals. If we were all factory workers, then for six days a week we'd work with parts and machinery on an assembly line. If we are trades people like plumbers or carpenters or electricians, we too focus on concrete objects. All these activities and professions focus on the world of space.

Some of us in this congregation might better be classified as knowledge workers. We are teachers, engineers, nurses, accountants, doctors, lawyers, and financial analysts. Our main focus is the world of ideas; we think for a living. Even

¹ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1951).

so, knowledge workers often ultimately focus on the world of space. Nurses and doctors try to heal bodies; engineers try to design reliable and efficient structures; and so on. Pastors too are knowledge workers, but the ultimate focus of our pastoral work centers on the kingdom of God, which is in some sense a spatial reality; and on the life and well-being of the church, which is the forerunner of the kingdom of God.

During Sabbath, however, we leave behind the world of space in order to enter the world of time. Think of it this way. The Judeo-Christian faith fundamentally revolves around major events in time. In the Old Testament some of the major events include the call of Abraham and Sarah, the exodus from Egypt, the giving of the law in the wilderness, the admonitions and visions of the prophets, and the exile. In the New Testament, the prime events center on Jesus: his birth, his ministry, his crucifixion, his resurrection, and his ascension. Then comes Pentecost and the subsequent mission of the church. All of these biblical events are mainly events in time. While it's true that these events also happen in geographical space, for biblical authors the real meaning of these events has to do with time. Yes, Jesus was crucified in the city of Jerusalem, but the place is not as important as the event itself. He could have been crucified in Antioch or Alexandria or even Rome, but we'd still say his death means the same thing.

Sabbath is a doorway into the world of time. To word it more precisely, Sabbath is a doorway into the world of *God's* time. For the 24 hours of Sabbath, we leave behind the world of space and taste a little bit of eternity. During Sabbath we don't have to pay attention to the needs and demands of space. We're free of all that. Instead we can enjoy time.

This distinction between space and time can help us discern what activities are appropriate for Sabbath. If the activity has more to do with space, then we can ignore it during Sabbath. But if the activity has more to do with time, then it might

be very appropriate for Sabbath. For instance, playing and listening to music could be a great Sabbath activity because music is about arranging sounds in time.

Reading a novel can be another great Sabbath activity since it gives us an experience in time. Socializing with family and friends are also experiences in time and therefore perfect for Sabbath. Jews have long said that sexual intercourse for couples is a perfect Sabbath activity, and when we understand the principle of time, we can see why: covenantal sex is mostly an experience in time. So if the activity is fundamentally about time, then it may be appropriate for the Sabbath.

Finally, we should name worship. One reason why worshiping God is a fine Sabbath activity is that worship is an experience of God in time. Yes, we worship in a particular space with its nicely painted walls, its crafted chairs, and its visual art. But all of these spatial elements exist to enhance our experience of worship in a particular moment in time. Worship, like Sabbath, is a foretaste of eternity. It focuses on communion with God, and as such is an ideal Sabbath activity.

As we discern what to do during our own Sabbaths, let us choose experiences of time, especially experiences that usher us into the eternal time of God.