

April 19, 2020

Genesis 2:1-4a

Exodus 20: 1-3, 7-11

Mark 2: 23-28

The Eighth Day
The Reverend Dr. Richard E. Spalding

“Very early on the first day of the week...”¹

That’s how the Easter story begins, almost identically in each of the 4 gospels. And that’s just about where the similarities between their narratives ends. When it comes to the details of that day, there’s not a lot of agreement about what happened, or to whom, or where they were, or what they did with the stunning testimony of the ones who’d been to the tomb, the ones who’d seen something, or *not* seen what they expected to see.

But all four gospels agree, at least, on when it all began: it was on the day we call Sunday. It was the first day of the week – before all that Easter business gave us reason to start calling it the Lord’s Day. It was the first day because it followed the last day: the Sabbath, the crown of the week, the day on which Jesus and his people were in the habit of remembering the completion of Creation, the beauty and intricacy and sufficiency of everything that God had made in the beginning. Easter follows the Sabbath as necessarily as Sunday follows Saturday. There’s a quality of hope built right into the deep structure of the way we experience time: after the end comes ... the beginning, again.

And, of course, you know the deep story that we tell to point to that deep structure: how it took six days for God to make everything, layering wonder upon wonder incrementally, one day at a time, which was good – even *very* good by the time it was done. And you know that, when God was finished, God rested from all that work of divine artistry – stood back to admire the granite and the glaciers and the ginkgoes and the goldfinches and the little double helixes of DNA, and thought: *that’s worth paying attention to*. And a few generations later, after the cycle of weekdays had gotten itself established into months and years and centuries, God urged the humans to make a point of stopping on that day of every week to pay attention to it themselves. Keeping the Sabbath – just that verb, *keeping*, is so beautiful, isn’t it? Keeping, guarding, hallowing – *keeping* the Sabbath became the defining practice of the Jewish people. Some liken it to our going to church on Sunday, but I think it’s more like our experience of Communion: Sabbath-keeping is almost sacramental, almost as though a piece of time embodies the divine. And the genius of it is that it comes along every week and *anybody* can “do” it: no special equipment or status required, all you have to do is light a candle and pay attention. And over the generations, as we hear in the third commandment in the book of Exodus, the way of keeping the Sabbath came to be embodied

¹ Luke 24:1. CF. Matt 28:1, Mark 16:1, John 20.1.

as a particular spiritual practice that, before I'm through, I'm going to invite us to pay attention to: the practice of *restraint*.

Meanwhile – it's Eastertide, when the earth in our latitude emerges into life from the tomb of winter. It's a new world around us – new because of Easter, surely, but new too because the emergence of this particular spring does not seem to have quite left the tomb behind, and so has taught us things about vulnerability that we weren't paying attention to before, and things, too, about our power to change things. Here in the church, in Eastertide, we tell the deep story of how the first followers of Jesus scrambled to weave their divergent experiences of his not-terminated, unstoppable life into an emerging consensus, around which to build a coherent movement that had power to change things. Here at First Pres over the next seven Sundays, as our way of Easter-keeping, Easter-holding, Easter-ing, we're going to pay attention to Creation: its beauty and intricacy and sufficiency, and its vulnerability too. And, just to keep you on your toes, we're going to do it by walking *backwards* through the story of Creation: beginning today with the final day, the culmination, Sabbath, and then peeling back the layered wonders week by week – humanity, and creatures, and soil, and water, and light – until, on Pentecost, we'll have gotten back to the essence of it all, at the very beginning: Spirit. And we'll see if we can make a movement out of all this – see what difference our Easter-ing can make if we steep it in the practice of paying attention to Creation.

If biblical commandment number three imposes the spiritual practice of restraint as the preferred method of Sabbath-keeping – well, that has acquired some bitter irony for us, hasn't it, during the weeks that brought us to this Easter. We're into our fourth full week of living under a civic commandment – a whole month of Sabbath which has fallen on some people with the cold shadow of a tomb and given others an opportunity to contemplate the fabric of creation around them, between them, within them, in all its complexity and mystery and power. In a way, the grand pause is its own kind of wonder: I think if we were to emerge from this month of civic Sabbath without a richer and humbler admiration for how life works, we'd have missed one of its most urgent and precious opportunities.

The biblical commandment insists that there be no work on the Sabbath except that work of paying attention. The biblical commandment says that that work of contemplation is holy work. And it would simply be impossible, wouldn't it, to do that holy work of stopping to savor the intricate wonder of what God made, as our sheltering-in-place has given us pause to do – it would be impossible to keep this strange Sabbath for the sake of our health and survival, wouldn't it, without also taking in the reality that the ingenious balance of it, the bountiful providence of it, the heart-stopping beauty of so much of it, are melting?

The Great Barrier Reef is being bleached. The North Pole is adrift. Uncountable species of creatures are on the move desperately seeking habitats that they can live in. And very soon, human homes on coasts and islands will be under water. All because the fires we've been burning for a couple of generations have thickened the atmospheric insulation around it all, and raised the temperature a degree or two. I know these are things you've heard before – things we'd all rather shut out of our heartwarming images of beloved nature. But, suddenly, circumstances have given us a massive Sabbath to contemplate what God made – an extended seventh day to stop most of our other work so that we can do the holy work which is ours to do on that day – which is to pay attention.

During this Eastertide we'll be reading my friend Jim Antal's book [Climate Church, Climate World](#) – and I hope you'll join us in thinking about its implications for us as we walk backwards through the layers of Creation. The book begins with this remarkable sentence: "The world – each fragment, as well as the whole – is a window into the love of God."² If that's the case, then let's ask ourselves what the Covid crisis is a window into? Or what

² [Climate Church, Climate World](#), p. 1.

the climate crisis is a window into? And let's start by asking ourselves what the Sabbath that concludes Creation is a window into.

The question of what the Sabbath is for is one that Jesus ran afoul of more than once in his few short years as a public figure. Authority figures of different kinds held him responsible for certain actions that seemed to violate the prevailing norms of Sabbath-keeping in his time – as when (in Mark, chap. 2) his hungry disciples were caught plucking grain as they walked through a field. Jesus's reply must have seemed to those authorities as though it stood restraint on its head – and they said to him, in effect: stop! It's the Sabbath, and you're not supposed to be doing anything! But Jesus said, in effect, we don't serve restraint, as though it were a value of its own; the restraint serves us, nourishes us, because it opens for us the space and time we need to pay attention to what we value. Jesus said, with his actions of healing people and feeding people and freeing people on the Sabbath, that the Sabbath is about paying attention to the deep story of God's relationship, and ours, to Creation. Reverence for the wonder of God's artistry – and what's at stake for us in it, how our very lives depend on it – is the point of Sabbath-keeping. The crowning day of the week is a time for re-centering ourselves for the life that follows it – not a contest of inaction.

And what is it that follows the Sabbath? What is the next thing that happened, in the deep story of the beginnings of Earth – after the original Sabbath, when the intricate sufficiency of the planet was finally whole and complete and God paused and paid attention to how good it was? What happened after Day Seven?

I know you remember your Genesis; everybody knows this part of the deep story. That's when the human creatures move to center stage, and the part of the story that involves them – us – takes a turn toward the testing of limits, and the hard work of accountability and respect and costs: the business with the garden, the tree, the apple, the excuses, the responsibility. The day after the Sabbath is the day that a new story starts.

There's a profound bit of meaning that Christian tradition has mined from the rather mystical seam, the sacred synapse, between the completion of one week and the beginning of another week. If the Sabbath was the 7th day, the concluding crown of the week of Creation – then that makes the day that follows it the 8th day: the day of new beginning. The day when, having completed the consummate work of divine artistry, and then having set aside a hallowed day to pay attention to it, existence rolls up its sleeves and starts again. If we measure our lives in weeks, then every Sunday is the Eighth Day – a new Easter. Maybe you've noticed that the baptismal fonts in many churches – including ours at First Pres – are octagonal. Baptism is *always* the Eighth Day, when time begins its glorious Easter-ing all over again in someone's life.

I would venture to say that, after these fearful weeks of the holy work, for most of us, of stopping to pay attention – and the holy work, for some of us, of risking life to simply keep human life itself alive – after all that, many of us are eager to go back to work, or eager just to be with one another again, side-by-side, weathering the joys and challenges of life together.

And if you were to ask the question, “What is the work of the 8th day, after six days of creation and one day of restraint leavened and chastened with awe and gratitude and humility?” – What would the answer be?

Consider what we’re been learning during this Covid-imposed period of restraint; consider what an ingenious – I would even say, inspired – lesson it has been teaching us. The work of the eighth day, the next week, the new beginning – the work we’ve been storing up spiritual energy for, moral energy for – is the work of fighting an invisible adversary that moves both infinitesimally slowly and also with the speed of lightning. It’s an adversary that has gained power through actions we took, choices that we made without realizing their significance – choices that have grown out of habits that have become very comfortable. It’s an adversary that can only be fought through an endless sequence of small personal choices whose cumulative positive effect is, also, invisible to our eyes, at least in real time. We’ve learned that, when there is a huge and daunting curve that needs to be flattened – whether it measures the rate of infections or the number of parts per million of CO2 in the atmosphere – our work *is* to flatten that curve. We’ve learned that its work that is within our capacity – but work that can only be done when each one of us presses down on the curve where we are in ways that are so simple as to seem almost banal. And none of us can expect to see anything move as a result of our taking these actions. We must simply believe that doing so will matter – because not to believe that is to surrender.

But believing that each one of our most mundane individual choices and actions matters that much is the best kind of faith, because it’s rooted in science – in fact it’s indistinguishable from science; it’s holy science, really, consecrated science. So the Eighth Day is before us again; and the Sabbath’s holy work of paying attention has taught us the holy work of the eighth day, the holy work of this Eastertide and of every Eastertide that will follow this one for the rest of our lifetimes.

© 2020 Richard E. Spalding