

## “Keeping Life in Balance”

Salado UMC—4 March 2018

Lent 4

Preaching Text: Exodus 20:1-17—Year B

Salado, Texas 76571

**“It’s a sign of mediocrity when you demonstrate gratitude with moderation”**

**Roberto Benigni (*Newsweek*).**

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Hear the day’s lesson:

20 Then God spoke all these words: 2 I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; 3 you shall have no other gods before me. 4 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. 5 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, 6 but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments. 7 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.

**8 Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. 9 Six days you shall labor and do all your work. 10 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. 11 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.**

12 Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you. 13 You shall not murder. 14 You shall not commit adultery. 15 You shall not steal. 16 You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. 17 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 (Exodus 20:1-20).

One of my watchwords for the church has been: “Come—Worship; Stay—Learn; Go—Serve.” This catchphrase highlights three Christian values: the worship of God, the learning/fellowship of Sunday school, and the service that the Lord requires: “do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God” (paraphrase of Micah 6:8). We not only worship God and attend Sunday school, but we as a church encourage spiritual and biblical growth opportunities. In these ways we keep life in balance. We keep balance today as Christian disciples by attending to our lesson and paying attention to a vital element of our ten commandments.

Wise Aristotle once wrote: “We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit.” A bedrock habit as lived out in accord with the Christian faith is the habit of Sabbath keeping. Marva Dawn described keeping the Sabbath as an exercise in ceasing, resting, embracing, and feasting (*Keeping the Sabbath Wholly*, Eerdmans, 1989). That is an excellent description of Sabbath keeping.

As Christians we follow our Hebrew forbears by doing what they did on the Sabbath: we rest and we remember. We rest because God rested on the seventh day (Genesis 2:2-3). In addition to resting we also remember what God has done for us. For the Hebrews this remembrance involved bringing to consciousness the Exodus story. Jesus “the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham” (Matthew 1:1) would have lived this holy habit of worship. Luke writes, “When he came to Nazareth, where he had

been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom” (Luke 4:16; see also, Matthew 12:9; 13:54; Mark 1:21, 23, 29; Luke 4:38; Luke 6:6). Jesus’ customary life included worship. Consider the commandment’s importance in the Hebrew Decalogue:

[8] Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. [9] Six days you shall labor and do all your work. [10] 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. [11] 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.

Sabbath keeping’s primary principles are these: ceasing, resting, embracing, and feasting. Each of these principles is clearly a focus of Exodus 20. The first principle of Sabbath is ceasing [from *shabbat*—to cease/desist]. This idea of ceasing on the Sabbath means faithful people break from worry, accomplishment, possessiveness, anxiety, work, etc. The commandment pertaining to sabbath keeping balances us. “Ceasing” mandates a break in our labor week. This suspension of our “business as usual” routine offers us a sense of the other six days’ wonder and blessing.

A second principle for sabbath keeping is rest. Resting too pertains to balance. Rest is doubtless for our physical bodies, but more too. God can work in us most effectively—and we can respond to God most faithfully—when we are wholly in tune with God. Too many of us are distracted by the 1000s of things that divert our attention. We are guilty of failing to rest on the sabbath. But as God originally conceived sabbath rest, Sabbath is a foretaste of eternal life. At times the root of any problem is that we are simply too tired—either physically or mentally—to address it. When in doubt, take a nap—then address your issues.

A third principle for sabbath keeping is embracing. Embracing means permitting time for God and for family. This embracing time allows nurture for the most important relationships in one’s life. We are not simply producers of material or of information. Rather God creates us to experience relationship with God and others. The principle of “embracing” guards against two conditions that slip up on people who work too hard—*anomie* and *ennui*. Anomie means “personal unrest, alienation, or uncertainty that comes from a lack of purpose or ideals.” Ennui is “a feeling of weariness and discontent resulting from boredom or lack of interest.” Anomie and ennui signal that something in life is amiss. Yet with the speed of today’s life people accept this descriptor of American life as simply one of life’s “givens.” Sabbath allows time to embrace God in worship and each other in fellowship—God time and family time. Embracing our calling in life means—we not just producers—we are related.

Finally, the last principle of our fourfold set of ceasing, resting, and embracing is the principle of feasting. Feasting is enjoying life. It means taking time to find pleasure in life by rejoicing in food and beauty. This means sabbath offers us permission and time to rejoice in music and the arts—rejoice in nature—rejoice in slowing down to be. We can enjoy what God created us to be. Our modern hi-tech society deprives us of these gifts and morphs into lost intimacy with God, ourselves, and others. Thus, in a culture that sees church, faith, religion, and spirituality as modern kill-joys, ironically the church values sabbath to reconnect. We re-connect by sabbath feasting. The primary principles of Sabbath keeping are: ceasing, resting, embracing, and feasting. These are sabbath gifts from God to God’s people.

During our Lenten time with Jesus we may focus on who God is and who we are. Too often in today’s climate of consumerism we only think about what we want—from our jobs, from our families,

from our schools, and from our churches. The point of discipleship is not to ask what God has done for us, but rather to offer ourselves God. We only offer ourselves as we look to God from the foot of the cross. From this eternal view we can better recognize what God in Christ has already done for us.

Our lives, if lived out of that love of God for us, remind us that to be God's person is to live in gratitude for the greatest of all possible gifts—the love of God in Jesus Christ. If we are too busy to cease, rest, embrace, and feast, then we are certainly too busy to remember what God has done and is doing for us. Use your sabbath wisely.

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The Lesson of the Wagon Train: From Rob Fuquay's e-blast—St. Luke's UMC, Indianaopolis

In her book, *Keeping the Sabbath Wholly*, Marva Dawn tells a story from the pioneer days about a wagon train traveling from St. Louis to Oregon. The members were devout Christians and followed the practice of observing the Sabbath and not traveling on Sundays. Winter was approaching and some feared they wouldn't arrive before bad weather. They recommended skipping their Sabbath practice and traveling seven days a week. The group divided over the issue, some traveling seven days and the other stopping on the Sundays.

Who arrived first? Oddly enough it was the Sabbath observers. It seems taking a day to rest benefited the horses and all the people. They were able to travel further in six days than the other group could in seven.

God designed us with a need for Sabbath. We get further in life when we take a day to cease (the meaning of the word Sabbath). This is why Jesus said, "The Sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath." (Mark 2:27) Obeying the Sabbath is not a religious legalism. It is key to health and well-being. The Sabbath is God's way of looking out for us.

We live in a Sabbath-less world in many ways. Kids' sports and activities are no respecter of Sabbath. Neither is technology. Many folks feel the need to sleep with their phones so as not to miss a thing. Sundays for some people become a time to catch up on the work they didn't finish the other six. "What happens if I don't get this finished?" we ask. But like the wagon train, motoring right through the Sabbath doesn't get us where we want to be any faster.