

“Shabbat Shalom” Exodus 20.1–17

The Rev. Hal Chorpenning, Plymouth Congregational UCC, 23 March 03

When I started writing this sermon on Wednesday, I was holed up in my basement office at home, comfortably snowed in – with plenty of food, a couple of DVDs, and my family safe and around me.

I was going to talk about the biblical concept of Sabbath: Shabbat in the Hebrew language. I was going to talk about needing to build in down time, so that we could live lives with a semblance of wholeness.

And then the news came at 9:15 on Wednesday night that we had begun our attack of Iraq. And my idea of preaching about the issue of Shabbat seemed somehow trivial and irrelevant. But, as I had a chance to reflect during our prayer vigil here at Plymouth on Thursday, I began to realize that I was doing Shabbat as I sat and prayed for peace, for the safety of children in Iraq and Kuwait, for the young men and women who stand ready to give their lives for their countries.

Perhaps now is the perfect time to talk about Shabbat.

The lectionary text appointed for today is the so-called Sinai Covenant, the Decalogue, the Ten Commandments. As I began to look at the list of “thou shalt” and “thou shalt not,” something really struck me: that there are a lot more words used to amplify and describe two of the commandments than the others. To my mind, that means that we humans need more elucidation of these points because we just don’t get sometimes. Here’s a little analysis I did: there are 316 words in the Ten Commandments.

9% of the words are used to tell us to have no other gods before our God.

8% proscribe inappropriate use of God’s name

8% tell us to honor our parents

1% warn us not to murder

1% condemn adultery

1% forbid stealing

3% prohibit bearing false witness

9% tell us not to covet things

28% describe the ways we should keep the Sabbath, and

29% warn us against false idols

So, the two that might be hardest for us to get through out rather thick heads are about resting and setting up things to worship (other than God, of course).

Sabbath is part of the natural rhythm of life for plants and animals. It is an essential component of the cycle of growth, rest, and regeneration. Fields lay fallow; animals shut down either at day or at night; we get buried in 30 inches of snow and have to stop in our tracks. When else do we get the chance to just **be** and lay fallow?

Elizabeth Canham wrote this in *Weavings*, which is a wonderful journal of spiritual life: “Lent is a good time to stop doing and try being.” She suggests that what we need to give up is something more substantial than eating chocolate or watching TV. It is our “workaholic guilt that degrades the value of play” and our anxiety “about not having enough of everything...” (She is talking about sabbath!) So, rather than depriving ourselves of something for Lent, she suggests we take up painting, listening to music,

reading good novels, walking in the woods, writing poetry, dancing, soaking in a hot tub, or enjoying good food with friends.”¹

Okay, don't you feel guilty doing stuff like that? I do! I find observing a Sabbath day the hardest commandment to follow. I'm better at **activity** than I am at **rest**. I'm better at **doing** than I am at **being**. I'm better at **engaging** than I am at **waiting**.

I think part of Sabbath is letting go of our anxieties and our need to control...to acknowledge that God is ultimately in charge. Listen to the words of Psalm 46 that we read together a few minutes ago: “Be still and know that I am God.”

A dear friend of mine, who is an Episcopal priest, uses this sentence as a way to wind down and enter the spirit of Shabbat. So, will you join me in a brief moment of resting in God? Close your eyes, if you wish, and get comfortable as I offer the words of the Psalm: “Be still and know that I am God...Be still and know that I am... Be still and know...Be still...Be.”

That's a beautiful way to enter into a time of prayer, too. So, you're welcome to use it anytime you wish for a moment of Sabbath.

You know, I have a hunch that I am not alone in our culture with doing, rather than being. We Americans originated the round-the-clock culture. Can you imagine a Mediterranean civilization developing the term 24/7??? Whether it's grocery stores that never close or the need for speed with your Internet connection or nonstop news from CNN, we Americans seldom stand still.

Have you noticed how many distinct pieces of information that CNN can throw at you simultaneously? It's seven. (I counted.) 1) the main news story delivered by the reader, 2) an illustration or graphic to go with it, 3) weather, 4) sports scores, 5) the time, 6) the moving news ticker, and 7) the all-important CNN logo. And if you're like me, you've seen a lot of screenfuls of information overload since last Wednesday evening. We would be well served by an information Sabbath; we need to slow down.

And we need to focus on news coverage that has perspective (not anxiety-inducing flash) and that makes a difference. There is a world of difference between *The Christian Science Monitor*, which offers insightful coverage of the important (and not the urgent) events around the globe, and raw footage, as-it-happens that spews out on CNN or local TV news. Give yourself an info-Sabbath!

Henri Nouwen said that we must not neglect the things in our lives that are truly important, because they tend to get eclipsed by the urgent. The artificial urgency in our lives – whether it's getting overfed data and war coverage by CNN or whether it's rushing from one meeting to another – does tend to overshadow the really important things.

Sabbath can be a cure for this modern American malady. If we take time to rest and reflect, time with family and friends to share a meal and a glass of wine, and have a good conversation, we tend to regain perspective.

Günter Plaut is a rabbi in the Reform tradition of Judaism and wrote these wise words about Shabbat:

“I view the Sabbath...as a ‘useless’ day. We must once again understand that doing nothing, being silent and open to the world, letting things happen inside, can be as important as, and sometimes more important than, what we commonly call the useful. Let there be some special time during the week when we do for the sake of doing; when we love the trivial and, in fact, simply love; when we do for others rather than ourselves

¹ Elizabeth Canham, *Weavings*, March/April 2003

and thus provide a counterbalance for the weight of endless competition that burdens our every day.”²

When you wish someone a good Sabbath in Hebrew, you say, “Shabbat shalom!” or peaceful Sabbath. The words Shabbat and shalom are linguistically related: they both convey the idea of resting in God. Observing Shabbat is one way of having a little slice of God’s shalom once a week.

In this week when our nation has plunged forward into a pre-emptive war, we could use a Sabbath. A time to remember whose people we are; a time when we remember that the earth all who are within it belong to God alone; a time when we remember what shalom really means: not simply the absence of war, but peace that is built on the foundations of God’s justice and community.

The other commandment that needs some elucidation for most of us is making false idols and worshipping them. Most of us aren’t going to craft a calf out of gold and make it the focus of our adoration, so are there other ways you can think of that you might create idols to worship?

Idolatry, says Frederick Buechner, is taking something that is *relatively* important and ascribing to it the characteristic of being *ultimately* important. There are a lot of things in our lives that are important in a relative sense, but aren’t the be-all and end-all. Yet, we can lose sight of the fact that God, and our relationship with God, is ultimately important. Many of the things we enjoy – a nice house, a good job, healthy sexuality, a nice car, physical fitness – are things that are of *relative* importance. But have you ever gotten out of balance with any of those things? How much time do you spend in pursuit of those relatively important things, and how much time do you spend in pursuit of things of ultimate importance, like working on your relationship with God, or visiting someone who needs your presence, or acting for the kind of justice God requires?

Idolatry for us probably doesn’t look like a golden calf, but I’d invite you to ask yourself: is there something in your life that’s consuming more of your time than what is ultimately going to make a difference in your life?

I’ve been with quite a few people as they near the end of life, and I’ve never heard one comment that they wish they’d had a fatter stock portfolio or six-pack abs.

So, I’d invite you to spend a moment and ask yourself what is of ultimate importance and how much emphasis you’re giving it.

I think we should also do some soul-searching as a nation about what is of ultimate importance. Are our national parks of relative or ultimate importance? Is our economy of ultimate importance? Is our system of international aid of relative or ultimate importance? Is education of relative or ultimate importance? Is our national security of relative or ultimate importance?

If you answered that any of those things were of ultimate importance, I would ask you to consider whether it has become for you an idol.

We are in a unique position internationally; we are the sole superpower. We wield more power than Rome did in Jesus’ day, and we have the potential to use our power to help bring in the kingdom of God here and now: to use our power and our influence to create and build up and not to destroy; to engender trust, not fear; to promote freedom and responsibility, not control by elites; to ensure the future of our planet, not to rape it. But, we have to keep our priorities straight. We need to know our weaknesses and the things that can lure us toward idolatry. And we must act from the

² Günter Plaut, *The Torah: A Modern Commentary*, p. 552.

highest calling, rather from the most common and base desires. If we keep in mind what is of ultimate importance, we will help our nation to do that.

In 1780, John Adams – a good Yankee Congregationalist – wrote these words to his wife, Abigail:

“I must study politics and war, that our sons may have liberty to study mathematics and philosophy. Our sons ought to study mathematics and philosophy, geography, natural history and naval architecture, navigation, commerce and agriculture in order to give their children a right to study painting, poetry, music, architecture, statuary, tapestry and porcelain.”

223 years later, we are still studying politics and war. But I think Adams forgot to include what was of *ultimate* importance, or perhaps he assumed that it was intrinsically part of every aspect of life. May it be so in your life.

On this day when our nation is at war, I wish you Shabbat shalom!

Amen.