North Shore Congregational Church
FOX POINT, WI

From the Pulpit...

"Delivered: The Other Sabbath"

Rev. Dr. Martin Hall – Preaching

Exodus 23: 1-13; Mark 2: 23-28

October 25, 2026

We have had some dialog in our Wednesday Bible discussion group, as well as in some of the daily vignettes on social media, about the broader picture of the communal transition that we see starting to take place in these middle chapters of the book of Exodus. The true 'exodus' portion of the story, by the time we reach these middle chapters, is in the rearview. The oppression and servitude is behind them. The plagues have come and gone. The Israelites have been led through the sea on dry land and watched the waters engulf their oppressors. They've encountered life's hurdles and God's provision on multiple occasions, and the time has come for them to set aside who they have been as an oppressed and hunted community and to develop a sense of who they are going to be as the people of God.

It starts in the 18th chapter as we begin to see a bit of a societal structure develop beyond Moses' central leadership, and then it continues in and through the declaration of the Ten Commandments and on into a litany of laws and rituals that are intertwined with the continued story of the wilderness journey that is shared throughout the entirety of the second half of Exodus. What's interesting in the midst of all of that, however, is the focus of the laws and commands that emerge starting with those Ten Commandments and beyond.

To be sure, there is more than a small amount of structure around how they will treat and worship God. From the commandments to have no other gods or idols through chapters upon chapters of mind-numbing minutia about structures, and rituals, and vestments, and everything in-between, there is plenty of focus on how the people will approach God. The other focus of the law, however, is how they treat one another – and what I want to suggest, this morning, is that we quickly begin to see that that law has a particular bent that deserves some attention.

The Ten Commandments, of course, include those basic laws of how everyone should treat everyone. 'Honor your father and mother.' 'You shall not murder.' 'You shall not steal.' These are pretty basic tenets of how we treat one another in society, and this social construct evolving for the Israelites is no different. It's what follows, however, that begins to take a particular focus. More and more, in the verses that follow the Ten Commandments, we begin to see laws about how slaves are to be treated – how women, widows and orphans are to be treated – how resident aliens should be treated. The early verses of the passage Rick read for us from Exodus 23 are reflective of this sensibility.

Even that classic line, 'an eye for an eye,' isn't the retributive notion that we read it to be – it's a levelling of the playing field. It's a statement that – regardless of wealth, power, or status – one cannot exact more or less penalty than the other. It's a way of making sure that the less fortunate will not be over-punished the nor more fortunate let off the hook.

Now, to be clear, this is not the entirety of the focus of the Law by any means, but there is a clear protection of the weak – a provision for the less fortunate – that becomes a centerpiece of the legal construct that is governing this newly forming Israelite community. In the wake of their own oppression and wandering, the people of Israel are brought into a distinct focus on being attentive to the care and concern of the less fortunate among them. And I say all of this because, in a way I'd never really noted before, the Sabbath is suddenly framed in that same light.

So, hang on to that notion for a few minutes, but let's talk about the Sabbath. There is no doubt that the Sabbath is a complicated concept to consider in 21st century practice, and that's really nothing new. The biblical texts that surround the Sabbath tend to lead us in different directions.

- The Sabbath article of the Ten Commandments really points towards a sensibility of worship and honoring God. *"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… 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." (Exodus 20:8-11)*
- Deuteronomy has similar language about the Sabbath being 'to the Lord,' but leans much more heavily into human rest and ties the whole thing more directly to the Exodus event. *"Observe the Sabbath day and keep it holy, as the Lord your God commanded you. 13 Six days you shall labor and do all your work. 14 But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work… 15 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 the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day." (Deuteronomy 5:12-15)*
- Later in Exodus, it is less about rest or honoring God and more about signifying the covenant between God and the people. *"Therefore the Israelites shall keep the Sabbath, observing the Sabbath throughout their generations, as a perpetual covenant. 17 It is a sign forever between me and the Israelites that in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day he rested and was refreshed." (Exodus 31:16-17)*

I could go on with these passages, both Old Testament and New, with some pointing towards worship and honoring God, others pointing towards human rest, and still others focused on covenant and sign. And then we turn to the Gospels, and we see that the Sabbath, over time, has become an end unto itself. In Mark's Gospel we encounter one of handful of the 'Sabbath conflicts' that emerge between Jesus and the religious establishment of the time.

> *One Sabbath he was going through the grain fields, and as they made their way his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. 24 The Pharisees said to him, "Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?" 25 And he said to them, "Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need of food, 26 how he entered the house of God when Abiathar was high priest and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and he gave some to his companions?" 27 Then he*

said to them, "The Sabbath was made for humankind and not humankind for the Sabbath, 28 so the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath." (Mark 2:23-28)

It's that final line that points to the fundamental issue that emerges a handful of times in the Gospels. *"The Sabbath was made for humankind and not humankind for the Sabbath."* The issue that Jesus is driving home here – one that is repeated in other places – is that the Sabbath had become the goal unto itself. Instead of the Sabbath having a role in uplifting their faithfulness, their faithfulness had become about uplifting the Sabbath. The Sabbath, Jesus makes clear, was meant to uplift the people – not to become a stringent law in and of itself.

So, the question remains. What do we do with it? Is it meant to honor God? Is it meant to serve as a sign of our relationship with God? Is it meant to provide us with rest and refreshment? I'd say that the answer is yes. In some ways, and in some occasions and circumstances, we need a Sabbath notion or practice that meets each of those things. When we consider Jesus' fundamental point that the Sabbath was meant to uplift humankind, however, and we connect that to the Sabbath proclamation in Exodus 23, there's an entirely different perspective on that Sabbath role emerges.

Going back to where we started, Exodus 23 continues that sensibility of protecting the less fortunate as it explores testimony in legal matters, ensuring justice for the poor, and consideration of the resident aliens among them. Then the 23rd chapter moves into that Sabbath instruction. "Six years you shall sow your land and gather in its yield," we read in verse 10, "but the seventh year you shall let it rest and lie fallow." "Six days you shall do your work," it says in verse 12, "but on the seventh day you shall rest." There's nothing new here. It all runs in concert with the rest of what we've talked about. What stands out, however, is the second half of each of these phrases. Each Sabbath command is followed by a reason – a purpose – a 'so that' – that identifies the heart that drives that Sabbath observance. And that 'so that' is not for our rest. And it's not for honoring God. And it's not as sign of the covenant.

Listen to that passage again – starting in the 10th verse of chapter 23.

"Six years you shall sow your land and gather in its yield, 11 but the seventh year you shall let it rest and lie fallow so that the poor of your people may eat, and what they leave the wild animals may eat. You shall do the same with your vineyard and with your olive orchard.

12 "Six days you shall do your work, but on the seventh day you shall rest so that your ox and your donkey may have relief and your homeborn slave and the resident alien may be refreshed.

'So that…'

'So that the poor of your people may eat.'

'So that your homeborn slave and the resident alien may be refreshed.'

I've been a part of many conversations and groups discussions about the Sabbath over the years. I've done plenty of sermons on the notion. I've heard the Sabbath discussed as something meant to set our focus on God. I've heard the Sabbath discussed as something intended to serve as an

act of devotion to God. I've heard the Sabbath identified as a way to give us rest in the midst of busy and demanding lives. And I've been a part of all manner of considerations of what that would look like – from the most stringent observances that we see in those walking to and from worship on the Sabbath throughout the North Shore, to those who equate it with attending worship, to those who see it as a less structured act of taking time for God in varying and creative ways. And that's all well and good and worthy of discussion. Never, however – never, until I was preparing for this series this fall – had it ever come up that a piece of the Sabbath puzzle might not be about me, nor about God, but about providing opportunity for care and support for the less fortunate around us. Never had I considered, nor had I heard other suggest, that while it might be about worship at times – and it might be about rest at others – that the Sabbath also might be about setting our time and intention on uplifting the humanity of those in need.

I understand that linking the Sabbath to a call to action seems counter-intuitive to say the least! And I don't mean to suggest that one should override the other. I was fascinated, however, as I dug into Exodus and found that the emerging sensibility of caring for the less fortunate made its way into even their notions of rest and taking time for God. Even the Sabbath, in this evolving communal structure of the Israelites, carried with it a consideration of what was being done to help uplift those in need. I'm not suggesting that whatever Sabbath means to each of us should suddenly be filled with bustling and busyness as we rush around to serve others. What I am suggesting, however, is that even their Sabbath carried with it a concern of how the less fortunate were being cared for in the communal structure they were developing, and I think that raises the question, for us, of where, when, and how we are seeking to make sure that our lives, our practices, and our days do the same.