

A Sermon for Dayspring Baptist Church
By Chris Fillingham
“A Sacred Rhythm”
2nd in the series *Church Matters*
Deuteronomy 5:6-15; Hebrews 10:10-25
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The Israelites finally made it to their destination. They’re on the edge of the land flowing with milk and honey. It just took them 40 years to get there.

Maybe your summer trip felt like that. A trip to Michigan to see your mom... or to West Virginia for our mission trip. A trip to youth camp that was supposed to be 11 hours turns into 15 hours... crammed in a mini-bus. Or a jaunt out to North Carolina for Zach’s wedding?

At some point on the road, the AC in your car breaks down (doesn’t it Celia Homsher?), or your patience wears out, or your sitting stand-still on the interstate in the middle of nowhere Kentucky, and you’re so sick of the road, you just want to be there.

You’re thinking why didn’t we fly? Flying is faster. Faster is better. I’m tired of all this stopping.

It reminds me of an ancient parable from the collection of the wise stories of... Thomas the Train.¹ Every day Thomas and his coaches puffed along not too fast and not too slow and stopped at every station.

They stopped at Knapford, where a little boy waved.

They stopped at Elsbridge, where a spotted cow mooed.

They stopped at Hackenbeck. People got on and people got off.

One day Tomas decided, “I’m tired of stopping at every station, I’m going to go from the start of the line to the end of the line without stopping once.”

And who can blame him? Faster is better, right? Why spend the whole trip stopping and starting, when he could press on. So, the next day, Thomas whizzed right by Knapford. The little boy hardly had time to wave. Clackity-clack, clackity-clack. Away with the tank-engine without looking back. (the train sounds are my favorite parts.)

And Thomas whizzed right by Elsbridge. The spotted cow hardly had time to moo. And Thomas flew past Hackenbeck. People did not get on. And People did not get off. Thomas had gone all the way from the start of the line to the end of the line without stopping once!

Obviously, Thomas is a well-adjusted middle-class American who knows how to get things done.

¹ Rev. W. Awdry, *Stop Train, Stop! A Thomas the Tank Engine Story*.

Because, that's how we live our lives. There's no time to stop along the way, is there? We just get to where we're going as fast as we can. Fit this in and fit that in. Whizz by this and whizz by that ... ***with hardly time to make the stops we were made for in the first place.***

Thomas gets to the end of the line and realizes something is wrong. He misses boys waving. He misses cows mooing. He misses people getting on and people getting off.

He had made it to the end of the line, and realized that the stops were what mattered. The stops along the way were what he was made for. The stops along the way gave the journey meaning and purpose. Without it, there was no used getting to the end of the line.

“I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You are to have no other gods before me. Do not make an idol for yourself... in any form of anything. Do not bow down and worship them, for I am the Lord your God... Keep the Sabbath day, and treat it holy. 6 days you may work and do all your tasks, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God.”

This is what the Israelites hear at the beginning of their wilderness wandering, just after they are delivered out of slavery from Egypt. Then, 40 years later, Moses is at the end of his life. He stands before the people at the edge of the Promised Land, and speaks these words again.

These aren't just commandments, like some kind of ridged rules that have to be followed. They are reminders of what is true about our lives and what is not true. And apparently it doesn't matter whether you're a little blue tank engine racing down the track, or an American:

bombarded every day by false messages,
addicted to compulsively checking your iPhone,
trying to keep up your productivity and social life and appearances...
Or you are an ancient Hebrew,
used to sand in your clothes
eating the same quale and manna every day,
and drinking mysterious water from rocks.

All of us, ancient and modern, young and old alike, need to be reminded of our story and hear what is true again and again. **“I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You are to have no other god's before me.**

This first commandment is the deepest truth of our lives. IT's where the ten ancient commandments begin, which is to say, it's where we must always return... Because the thing is, the gods in our lives are many. They demand from us, and pull on us, and make so many promises to us that we hardly notice how subtly they take over... and begin to enslave us.

You know what that is like. We say “Amen” one Sunday morning and then we go about our scattered lives, right? The next day you’re walking the halls at school again... you go back into the office... and the demands that are placed on you are consuming.

Or your paying your bills at home and not sure how you got so many.

Or you’re back at it with your parents again... or with your spouse again,

Or you’re sucked into one TV episode after another, in one more round on the Xbox... like a vortex that won’t let you go.

Or you’ve got to face the doctor again today...

As a pastor friend of mine put it, **“The circumstantial sovereigns of our lives that reign between Sundays are [countless], as are all the gods that dwell in the inner regions of who we are.**

Even [those of us] not facing dramatic difficulties, those who manage life well, and confess faith with confidence, are also dealing with “inner demons.”

We are scattered...dispersed... tugged at... controlled. This is our reality every week, Monday through Friday.”²

We know this is true, which is why we need to hear the ancient words again and again: **“I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt. You are to have no other god’s before me...”**

None of those other gods are to define you... or to control you... or to consume you. And that’s good news, isn’t it? The only God that can lay claim on our lives is the God who delivers us out of bondage... out of all the things that want to enslave us. This is the only God that we are to bow down to, and give ourselves to.

But lure and power of the gods are strong, and our memories are weak. The only way we’re going to have a shot at living with the God of salvation at the center of our lives, is to give ourselves to the ancient sacred rhythm:

“Remember the Sabbath, and keep it holy. Six days you may work and do all your tasks, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God.... “

Without this sacred rhythm, the countless other gods will always take over. They gradually move to the center of our thoughts... running through our minds day after day like an endless script that won’t be quiet. You could say they begin to possess us.

Gradually they take over our emotions... pulling us up and down, and toss us around like a wave of the sea.

Gradually they take over our pocketbooks, with the subtle suggestion that this purchase will inoculate us from the emptiness. This debt won’t hurt. After all, you deserve it.

² Burt Burleson, *On Being Gathered*.

What they say sure sounds good. And so, we keep coming back to them, bowing down to their demands on us. Gradually they take over our very lives. This is what happens.

It's happening all the time, all around you...
with your neighbors
and your friends and family...
and... in... you, isn't it?

And the only prescription for this is the ancient Sabbath rhythm. It's the regular stops along the timeline that keep our journey's meaning and purpose central. The stops long the line reminds us what we're made for. Without this sacred rhythm, you'll get to the end of the line, look back, and realize that you missed the point all along the way.

Abraham Heschel was a 20th century Jewish scholar, mystic, activist and theologian. One of the books he is well known for is on *The Sabbath*. He says that the Sabbath is an invitation to **"letting go of the nervousness and fury of acquisitiveness and the betrayal in embezzling [our] own lives."** Somehow we have to trust that the world has already been created without us and will survive without our help.

And then he writes: **"Six days a week we wrestle with the world, wringing profit from the earth; on the Sabbath we especially care for the seed of eternity planted in the soul. The world has our hands, but our soul belongs to Someone Else."**³

You see, we were created to live a sacred rhythm.
Yes, six days a week we are going to be scattered,
agenda driven,
producing,
creating,
fixing.

But thanks be to God another Sunday rolls around, and we're invited to put everything else aside,
in order to stop listening to all that wants to define us,
and to make intentional plans to worship.
to gather together to be reoriented to our true sovereign,
to gather together to be re-centered in the One true God,
who is our salvation.

It's part of the reason the church matters so much. We need a community inviting us... challenging us... to stop and gather again... and we need a sacred space in which to gather.

³ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath*, 13.

Of course, we can encounter God outside of these walls, and outside the community of the church. Hopefully, all of us do, from time to time. That's no big surprise. I can't help but laugh when I hear Lillian Daniel talk about this.

Lillian Daniel is a pastor. She says that she always dreads that moment when she's sitting on an airplane and the person next to her finds out she's a pastor and then spends the rest of the flight explain to her that they are "spiritual but not religious."

This is what she says:

Such a person will always share this as if it is some kind of daring insight, unique to him, bold in its rebellion against the religious status quo.

Next thing you know, he's telling me that he finds God in the sunsets. These people always find God in the sunsets. And in walks on the beach. Sometimes I think these people never leave the beach or the mountains, what with all the communing with God they do on hilltops, hiking trails and ... did I mention the beach at sunset yet?

Like people who go to church don't see God in the sunset! Like we are these monastic little hermits who never leave the church building. How lucky we are to have these geniuses inform us that God is in nature. As if we don't hear that in the psalms, the creation stories and throughout our deep tradition.⁴

Of course we're invited to encounter God in countless ways outside of our gathering. The fact is, our gathering to worship builds within us a capacity to see God and encounter God more fully outside these walls.... because we are more centered in God... and less driven by everything else that wants to consume us.

No, we don't have to come to church to encounter God.

And yes, we can practice rest outside of worshipping together.

But the sacred rhythm of Sabbath has always been about **more than me and my private God**, and never just about taking a day off.

It is the practice of stopping all our other pursuits,
to gather with the community of faith,
to worship the one true God...
to be reoriented,
to be re-centered in the right sovereign.

"Don't stop meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing," Hebrews warns us. **"Instead, encourage each other... all the more as the day draws near."**

⁴ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/lillian-daniel/spiritual-but-not-religio_b_959216.html

Ironically, even many atheists have begun to discover how much they need that. They're waking up to the fact that they need a community to gather with.

Just last year, 2 well known atheists called a meeting in a deconsecrated church in N. England. 300 people showed up.

So the decided to move to a larger venue and meet twice a month. This time 600 showed up. They called themselves the Sunday Assembly... and the idea began to spread. Within 4 months, these Sunday Assemblies sprung up in 30 cities, across the UK, the US, and Australia.⁵

Makes you wonder what they are doing right? Well, they socialize, they sing, they listen to someone speak, because they want to help one another live deeper lives and become the kind of people they want to become.

Sound familiar?

Something within us needs this. We were made for a sacred rhythm of gathering and worship. Without it, we become fractured, shallow, blind. We become self-oriented and thin... like a shadow of who we are made to be.

Lillian Daniel goes on to say this about being Spiritual But Not Religious: *Being privately spiritual...just doesn't interest me. There is nothing challenging about having deep thoughts all by oneself. What is interesting is doing this work in community, where other people might call you on stuff, or heaven forbid, disagree with you.*

*Where life with God gets rich and provocative is **when you dig deeply into a tradition that you did not invent all for yourself.***

Thank you for sharing, spiritual-but-not-religious sunset person. You are now comfortably in the norm for self-centered American culture, right smack in the bland majority of people who find ancient religions dull but find themselves uniquely fascinating.

Can I switch seats now," she asks, "and sit next to someone who has been shaped by a mighty cloud of witnesses instead? Can I spend my time talking to someone brave enough to encounter God in a real human community? Because when this flight [we are all on] gets choppy, that's who I want by my side, holding my hand, saying a prayer and simply putting up with me, just like we try to do in church."⁶

We create this space and time, we open these doors and invite you in each week because whether or not you're aware of it, we know you need this... Our ancient tradition has taught us, this is the rhythm that heals the soul, and gives shape and meaning for the journey.

⁵ Lloyd Geering, *Why Go to Church?*, The Fourth R, Nov-Dec 2014.

⁶ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/lillian-daniel/spiritual-but-not-religio_b_959216.html

So come and sit among us, again and again,
as we sit among the great cloud of witnesses.
Gather with us, and worship the one true God...
who sets you free.
who offers you bread to feed your hunger
and wine to quench your deep thirst.

Prayer:

*O God, for the gifts of the table and this church we give thanks,
because we know they flow from your heart, through this church, to us.
So in this moment, we let go of all the other gods that want to consume us,
and we come to you.
Fill us and make us whole we pray,
In the name of the one who taught us to pray, saying... Our Father, who art in heaven...*