Let me pick up where I left off last time. Those of you who were here on the first Sunday of June when we kicked off this God’s Good Earth series, might remember that I read to you from the first creation story in Genesis. Some of you might have been wondering why I stopped that morning at Day Six when God looked over everything he had made and saw that it was so good, so very good!

The rest of that story is found in the first verses of the second chapter of Genesis. There Scripture tells us, “Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude. And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it (God made it Holy), because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation. These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created.” (Genesis 2:1-4 – NRSV)

The end of this creation story is the beginning of the Sabbath practice in the Judeo-Christian tradition. The Hebrew word for Sabbath is Shabbat, which literally means to cease or to stop. Stop is exactly what God did on the seventh day. God rested from all the work that God had done in creation. Shabbat is such an important part of our faith tradition that it even made it onto God’s “Top Ten List” that was given to Moses on Mt. Sinai. Out of those Ten Commandments, most begin with either “you shall…” or “you shall not…” One begins with “Honor… your father and your mother.” And finally there is one, the fourth commandment, that begins with “Remember…” In order to remember something it must already be a part of who we are.

“Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy” is one of the longest of the Ten Commandments. “Six days you shall labor and do all your work. 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. 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 20:9-11)

I find it interesting that we don’t really question any of the other of the Ten Commandments. I don’t hear many people saying, “Uhh… not stealing or not murdering… not that important.” “Adultery and bearing false witness… no big deal.” Yet we seem to simply disregard, if not outright ignore, the commandment to “Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy.” Keeping the Sabbath Holy is not a common practice in our culture, nor is it a dis-order we seem to be in any hurry to remedy.

Before we get into the details, let me acknowledge that the devil can be in the details. That is precisely why Jesus, in the story I read to you earlier from Mark, said that “The Sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath.” We are not to be servants to the Sabbath. The Sabbath was established to serve us and the whole of creation. The particulars of the Sabbath practice, the timing of time set aside to stop and rest, are helpful inasmuch as they call us into a regular remembrance of the Sabbath and the practice of keeping it holy. Yes there are dangers inherent in a tendency towards a legalistic observance of Sabbath. Yet frankly for us I see a greater danger today in our forgetting the Sabbath altogether.

It is striking that even God found time to rest, and we can’t seem to be able to do so. We live in a culture that worships busyness and constant productivity. Time left idle is often seen as time wasted. I ask today not that we be lazy or sluggish, for God first worked six days creating all of heaven and earth before taking one day to rest. However we need to recognize our tendency towards idolatry in our inability or unwillingness to stop, to simply cease. The unconscious assertion is that without us and without the fruits of our hard-fought labor the work would not get done. It’s
quite presumptuous if you actually stop to think about it. First of all, the work is never really done. Creation is ongoing and not yet complete. Secondly, does the sequence of success and the turning of time ultimately depend that much upon us? Is it really in our hands? Are we all that indispensable?

Edwin Marty laughed when I called him this week and told him, “I was reading Leviticus this morning and thought of you.” “Yeah, that’s what I hear every time I pick up the phone,” he quickly responded. Edwin is the founder and director of the Jones Valley Urban Farm here in downtown Birmingham. I am thankful that Shannon pulled this passage from Leviticus 25 into our summer readings because it ties the practice of Sabbath back to the land.

As Bill read to us earlier, “The Lord spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai (where he was also given the Ten Commandments), saying… When you enter the land that I am giving you, the land shall observe a Sabbath… in the seventh year there shall be a Sabbath of complete rest for the land, a Sabbath for the Lord… it shall be a year of complete rest for the land.” (see Leviticus 25:1-7) I called Edwin Marty to ask him from an agricultural perspective about giving the land a rest. He said that farmers practiced laying land fallow for millennia. There was a knowledge in wisdom gained that the land needed to rest in order to be able to produce over the long haul.

He said all this changed with the advent of synthetic nitrogen fertilizer. The current thought is that we can substitute laying land fallow with a synthetic, man-made solution. By pumping more chemicals into the ground, science has led us to believe that the ground will give us more and more of what we want. However without giving the land a rest, the opportunity is missed for the organic material in the soil to rebound, and it is this organic material that holds it all together. Hence the massive erosion problems we are experiencing in much of our farmland. When the rain comes and the wind blows, there is nothing left to bind the soil. When the storm hits, there is nothing left to hold it all together.

Do you begin to see the parallels? Edwin said at Jones Valley Urban Farm they indeed practice soil conservation through allowing land to lay fallow, but he acknowledges that it is complicated. There is a gigantic push to be more profitable, and it is economically not beneficial (at least in the short run) to let land lay fallow. We have created technology that enables us to do more, but at what cost Marty asks over the long-term? In Wayne Muller’s book titled Sabbath, he has a chapter in which he explores the natural dormancy period of perennial plants that allows them to return to life year after year. Muller writes, “Dormancy allows plants and their seeds to develop stress-resistant annual resting periods... Dormancy maximizes the seed’s strength and hardiness, making it less susceptible to climatic extremes. In a given season this may diminish the yield, but it is a rhythm designed less for quick profit, and more for an abundance over eternity.”

We live in a 24/7 world designed for quick profit. The next best technology that will enable us to “do more” is always about to be released. We have forgotten the wisdom of Shabbat. Faithful still, our Holy Scriptures call us to stop and to remember. Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy. Remember to let yourselves and the very land have the needed time to rest. The Jubilee year of which Bill also read earlier is a reminder that all things, including the land, ultimately come from and belong to God. They are simply placed in our trust, and we are to care for them and for the life that has been given to each of us as a gift.

As we move towards our national celebration of July 4th, I remind you that the inscription on our Liberty Bell comes from this very call of the book of Leviticus (Lev XXV X) – “You shall

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proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants.” Shabbat is also a justice issue. It is a time of rest for male and female, free and un-free, laborers and resident aliens, livestock and land, you and me.

I’ll be the first to admit, I don’t regularly practice a full day of Sabbath each week. It is difficult to do at this time and place in my life. There are some authors over the past years who have been encouraging us to at least find Sabbath moments to stop. I think their encouragement to seek out “Sabbath time” when we can is a good one, and I too encourage you to do so.

However the Biblical call is clear to set aside a more significant time, a regular day each week, to keep the Sabbath holy. Perhaps by practicing the spirit of Sabbath in shorter increments we might be led into realizing the importance of taking God’s lead and truly giving it a rest. Sabbath is not a time for us to do so much as it is a time for us to be - a time to be with God, a time to be with creation, a time to be with each other. It is a time to simply be and know that there is enough, we are enough, and God is enough. Sabbath is a time to regularly reorient our lives around the creation rhythm that God the Creator both established and observed.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel perhaps put it best - “The meaning of the Sabbath is to celebrate time... On the Sabbath we try to become attuned to the holiness in time. It is a day on which we are called upon to share in what is eternal in time, to turn from the results of creation to the mystery of creation; from the world of creation to the creation of the world.”² Our lives and our land need to rest. Let us remember the Sabbath and keep it holy. Amen.