



A SERMON

by Rev. Dr. Joanne Whitee: July 12, 2026



TODAY WE BEGIN A THREE-WEEK SERIES ON THE SABBATH, which has the same root as the word, "sabbatical." The book of Leviticus declares that every seventh year is a sabbatical year when the land "shall have a Sabbath of complete rest." There were practical reasons behind it this: fields and animals become progressively less productive without a break. A modern day sabbatical honors this reality: our brains, our bodies, our hearts will be more creative and life giving if we get a break from the routine every now and then.

Your pastor, Marci Glass, began *her* sabbatical last week. It's hard to believe, but she's been your pastor for six years; it's time for a well-deserved breather. The last time I preached at Calvary was just before Marci arrived; I was temporarily on staff while

associate pastor Joann Lee was on parental leave, welcoming Joey. Which, let me be quick to say, is nothing like a sabbatical as you know if you've ever cared for a newborn. That was the spring COVID shut everything down and we had to learn, very quickly, ... how to offer worship that resembled what you've come to expect here at Calvary. It was an honor to be a part of that adventure along with Victor, Cal Chinn and John Walko and Michael, who figured out how to make the music work.

Some of you will remember many years ago when I was an associate pastor here at Calvary. I left in 2005 to become pastor/head of staff at First Presbyterian Church of San Anselmo, and it was during my 15 years there that I, too, had the privilege of taking a sabbatical. I was blessed with a personnel committee that said, "Just take time off." I spent the first week on the island of Iona off the coast of Scotland, one of the oldest Christian centers in Europe and the site of a retreat center where you cannot get the Internet or Wi-Fi. I worshiped twice a day; I washed dishes and cleaned showers because if you stay at the Abbey, you're assigned chores. I walked the island, sharing trails with sheep. I journaled, sang, and laughed a lot. It was pretty perfect because it was the reset I needed to begin a real sabbatical, a real sabbath, during which I wasn't Joanne the pastor, but rather, Joanne the child of God. That was very freeing, and I returned to my ministry, three months later, not only refreshed but with more creativity. That is my prayer for Marci and this congregation; that is what Sabbath is about. Today we'll look in particular at Sabbath freedom; how Sabbath is intended to remind us that God wants freedom for everyone, because believe it or not, we were not created to be exhausted as cogs in a perpetually productive machine. Sabbath, as Walter Brueggemann put it, is not only the pause that refreshes, but the pause that transforms.ⁱ

Deuteronomy 5:12-15

12 "Observe the Sabbath day by keeping it holy, as the Lord your God has 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. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your ox, your donkey or any of your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns, so that your male and female servants may rest, as you do. 15 Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the Lord your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the Lord your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day.

Matthew 11:28-30

28 "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. 29 Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30 For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

THE TEN COMMANDMENTS HAVE BEEN IN THE NEWS RECENTLY, with several states embroiled in court battles over whether to post them in public buildings. During oral argument in a Texas case, Justice Scalia said, "I think probably 90 percent of American people believe in the Ten Commandments, even though 85 percent couldn't tell you what the ten are."

The fourth commandment, the Sabbath commandment, is indeed one of the Ten commandments, but **do** people "**believe**" in it? The Ten Commandments appear in two places in the Old Testament, in Exodus, and then in Deuteronomy, which we read this morning. "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..." I'm going to go out on a limb and say this might be the least "believed," the least observed commandment, even by people who consider themselves faithful Christians. Let me be quick to say I'm NOT talking about the kind of observance that some of us remember. My Scottish grandmother wasn't allowed to do

needlework on Sunday, and even when I was a kid, most stores were closed—that's hard to imagine today when Sunday is the biggest shopping day of the week. There was a time when our American culture assumed everyone was Christian, or *ought* to be, and most places had restrictions about what people could do on Sundays. Blue laws, they're called. I lived in Texas in the 1970s and on Sundays, there was a great big sign across the beer section of the grocery store: NO BEER SALES ON SUNDAYS. There were also other things you couldn't buy that never made sense to me. You could buy garden hoses and fertilizer but not hardware or cookie sheets or pillowcases.

One problem with Sunday blue laws is the same problem with posting the Ten Commandments in public places: Not everyone in our culture is Christian. People of different faiths have different sabbaths, many people have no connection to organized religion, and no one should be forced to observe a Christian holy day. In fact, the Sabbath that's assumed in the Ten Commandments isn't Sunday. Genesis tells us that God created the world in six days and on the seventh day God rested. The Jewish Sabbath has always been the seventh day, Saturday. Early Christians first observed Sabbath on Saturday but over the centuries, they began to celebrate on Sunday, the day of Resurrection, and in 321 Emperor Constantine tried to clear up any confusion by declaring Sunday as the Sabbath for everyone in the Roman Empire – a very imperial thing to do. That means if Christians observe Sabbath at all, they observe **a** Sabbath, not **the** Sabbath.

But should we observe the Sabbath, or a Sabbath? Must we? And why? The Ten Commandments appear first in Exodus, right after Moses brought the tablets down from Mount Sinai. Here in Deuteronomy, the people Israel are about to enter the Promised Land after 40 years in the wilderness, and Moses wants to remind them about God's covenant and God's laws because he knows how easy it is to forget them, to forget where you came from, forget who you are and whose you are when you're surrounded by a different culture. While the Exodus version of this commandment refers to God's rest after the six days of creation, this version refers to freedom from slavery:

"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."

Exodus tells us in passionate terms how Pharaoh demanded that the Hebrew slaves produce more and more bricks to build more and more storehouses for Pharaoh's surplus wealth. There was no day off, no *time* off, only more work. Into this hopeless weariness erupts the God of the burning bush who hears the despair and fatigue of the people, and sends Moses to liberate them.ⁱⁱ The Sabbath commandment acknowledges that God's people are not commodities to be dispatched for endless production. As Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann put it, Sabbath is **resistance**; resistance to the system that would have us work more, accomplish more, possess more, and consume more. It's resistance to a system that is dehumanizing, that would have us be nothing more than economic drones.

Here in Deuteronomy, we see that this applies to all of humanity, regardless of status. Deuteronomy pays particular attention to widows, orphans, and immigrants; to all those needing protection, the people on the margins of society. While Exodus also commands that servants, livestock, and resident aliens are to rest, Deuteronomy adds, so that they may rest "like you." "Like you." It's really quite radical, when you think about it. Rest is not the privilege of the powerful or the worthy or the insiders, but the right of everyone. The Sabbath commandment points us toward not only valuing our humanity but toward valuing the humanity of everybody. Think about it: When everybody rests, we all look the same—poor and rich, ruler and slave, weak and strong, healthy and sick, old and young – all those labels disappear. When we're at rest, nobody is ahead or behind; nobody is better or worse.ⁱⁱⁱ On Sabbath days or Sabbath times, your vulnerable, exposed neighbors are "like you." They get to rest and just be children of God.^{iv} Like you. The Sabbath commandment announces, "This is a hard one, former slaves, so listen up: You really are supposed to stop. All of you, every week, every thing, no exceptions. You've been delivered from a life of slavery, where your output was the sole measure of your value, and any weakness or need was a life-threatening deficit."^v "Remember instead that you're made to care for one another, including all those vulnerable people in your midst, just like God cares for you. You must stop, regularly, to remember this, or all the other commandments will become simply another way to measure, compete, and dehumanize yourselves and others. You'll forget the God who saves you and the freedom you've been saved for, and you'll go back to being slaves."^{vi}

We observe the Sabbath because no one—not us, not anyone—should be a slave. So maybe, by keeping Sabbath, by observing a Sabbath rest, we just might grow in our longing for a system where no one is a slave; where no one is a commodity; where all people have a living wage and time for rest and worship, too.^{vii} And you know, maybe that includes thinking about the people who make the things we buy, and whether *they* are being treated like slaves.

Now, we might think, "Isn't it wonderful that everyone's included; I'm all for inclusion but I'm not a slave; I've never been a slave; this doesn't apply to me."

Or—does it?

Do you wake up at night, remembering what you were supposed to get done, vexed that you didn't meet expectations—yours or someone else's? Do you fall asleep counting bricks—and by bricks, I don't literally mean bricks but whatever it is that you're supposed to produce, accomplish, check off your to-do list; the 21st century equivalent of bricks in your job, or your home, or your volunteer work—whatever? Do you dream of the more bricks you have to make or of the bricks you did make that were flawed?^{viii} I confess there are times that I do. We might not be slaves in the way the Israelites were or some people still are, but certainly plenty of us have to work long hours and many of us have a harder and harder time disconnecting from work. We can be reached by cell phone or email 24/7. If you work in global industries, you deal with folks in Bangladesh or Shenzhen when those people are awake. And then there's the depressing and exhausting daily news cycle; it wears us out, right? Life, for people at all levels of the economic ladder, is hectic and demanding; it grinds us down. Maybe you actually love your job; maybe you feel terrific about your volunteer work, but even good work needs to have limits.^{ix} In Exodus, Moses had the people build the tabernacle, the tent in which they worshiped as they wandered in the wilderness. Presumably that was good work, rewarding work, right? But still, God made it clear in God's tabernacle instructions that even good work needs time off.^x

Couldn't we all use a Sabbath? A day of rest? The Matthew text invites the question, "Who among us *isn't* weary?" God knows we *need* a rest. People need down time in order to heal, recover, reconnect with themselves and their humanity, and therefore the humanity of others and the God who commands us to love our neighbors as ourselves. That is how Sabbath transforms—by reconnecting us to God and humanity. But the really hard question, and one I think we'll be wrestling with in these three weeks we're talking about Sabbath—is **how** do **we** observe Sabbath—either **the** Sabbath or **a** sabbath—in 2026? What's realistic? Those of us who work all week do our laundry and shopping on weekends. People with kids generally find weeknights full of homework and weekends full of sports, recitals, and birthday parties. Plenty of folks have not one job but two—or more—just to make ends meet. We might long for our relationship with time—and therefore with God—to be different, but how?

I think this will take some experimenting, both in terms of our own schedules—and how we make space for everyone to get real, quality time off. I read about an ER doctor and her husband who work conflicting schedules, making a family sabbath impossible. Instead, she takes "Sabbath **time**," which she puts in quotes because it's not a full day and not always the same day of the week. She writes, "My son and I read, sing, put together puzzles, make cookies, go to a museum, tromp through the woods. Nothing that needs to be scheduled unless it is wonderful and joyous"^{xi}

Wonderful and joyous. Because we were created for good work, to be sure, but we were created to be free—free to experience what's wonderful and joyous. Free to reconnect with God, with the people we love, with *ourselves*, for crying out loud. We worship the God who says, "Take a break. You need a rest. You are not a slave." As Brueggemann wrote, "To cease, even for a time, the anxious striving for more bricks is to find ourselves with a 'light burden' and an 'easy yoke,'" just as Jesus offers. "It is now, as then, enough to permit dancing and singing into an alternative life."^{xii}

Dancing and singing into an alternative life. Doesn't that sound—restful? May it be so for you, and for me. Amen.

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- ⁱ Walter Brueggeman, *Sabbath as Resistance: Saying No to the Culture of Now* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2014, revised 2017).
- ⁱⁱ Brueggemann, 5.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Kara Root, <https://kara-root.blogspot.com/2016/10/work-rest-repeat-aka-belonging-training.html>
- ^{iv} Brueggemann, 45.
- ^v Root, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/preaching-series-on-sabbath/commentary-on-deuteronomy-512-15-matthew-1128-30>
- ^{vi} Root, *ibid.*
- ^{vii} Dorothy C. Bass, "Keeping Sabbath," in *Practicing Our Faith* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1997), 84.
- ^{viii} Brueggeman, 42.
- ^{ix} Carol Bechtel, *Celebrating Sabbath: Accepting God's Gift of Rest and Delight* (Louisville, KY: Horizons 2022-2023), 51.
- ^x Exodus 35:1-3.
- ^{xi} MaryAnn McKibben Dana, *Sabbath in the Suburbs: A Family's Experiment with Holy Time* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2012), 45-46.
- ^{xii} Brueggemann, 19.