

Sermon—March 8, 2015—3 Lent
St. James Episcopal Church, Mt. Airy

I am so honored to be standing before you today, this third Sunday in Lent. I was not expecting Bill's invitation to preach at all, but during our weekly lectionary get-together, which includes pastors of several denominations, Bill asked me and I immediately accepted. So, here I am.

And I am going to challenge myself by attempting to connect the dots between the reading from Exodus—the Ten Commandments—with the Gospel passage in which Jesus rants in the temple in Jerusalem. And I hope to do this under the theme St. James has taken on for this Lenten season: Listening. That is listening to God, listening to Jesus, listening to each other, and listening to ourselves.

Much has been written about the Ten Commandments, but I am only going to concentrate on only one, the commandment concerning the Sabbath day. Yes, I am going to let you off the hook this third Sunday in Lent. We are not delving into swearing, lying, honoring mom and dad, murdering, stealing, adultery, or, heaven forbid, worshipping any other God than Yahweh. No, today I want to concentrate on resting and recreation...recreation as in re-creating:

Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy. 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.

In short, this is the beginning of the weekend. This is the root of TGIF. According to Thomas Cahill in his book *The Gifts of the Jews* no ancient society before the Jews had a day of rest.¹ But now, on the Sabbath, God commands a day of rest and recreation, or if you will, re-creation. Sabbath means "Ceasing." On the Sabbath day God commands us to cease our worldly labors and engage in activities that stir our hearts and nurture our souls. Worship is only one of these activities. Surely this commandment is one of the sanest and simplest.

Sane, yes, but perhaps keeping the Sabbath, the Ceasing, is more difficult for us in this modern world. What day is the Sabbath? For the Jews it was Saturday—starting at sundown Friday. Saturday is the Seventh Day. Christians worship on Sunday—the first day. I feel that in this day an age we should pick a day that is our Sabbath, our ceasing. Mine is Monday. And if we cannot set aside a whole day, we should pick a part of that day. The Sabbath is a gift from God—albeit in the form of a commandment—and should not be squandered. It should be treated as a blessed gift. This Ceasing is particularly important in the season of Lent during which we listen for the presence of God in ourselves and in each other. To listen successfully we need to cut down on other activities that drown out that voice. Otherwise we are merely hearing. When I am engaged in an

¹ Cahill, Thomas, *The Gift of the Jews*" (Nan A. Talese Doubleday, 1998), p-144

activity such as writing, and I have Pandora on playing the Dave Brubeck channel, I am merely hearing the music. I am not listening. Hearing is passive—whatever sound waves contact the eardrum causes us to hear. Listening is actively participating in the sounds that we hear. To listen successfully, we need to turn down the static. We need to engage in some ceasing. We must practice keeping the Sabbath. Elijah only heard the wee small voice of God—silence really—in the quiet after the storm passed over Mount Horeb. He expected to hear in the thunder and lightning of a raging storm. But no! Elijah heard God's voice in the silence...in the Ceasing. During this Lenten season let us focus on God's commandment to keep the Sabbath.

Now, I want to look at our Gospel passage and see if we can make a connection with the Sabbath. This is a famous passage much commented on by New Testament scholars. Jesus drives from the Temple—with a whip no less—all those selling various creatures used in the sacrifices that temple worship demands. And bear in mind that in this Gospel passage the Passover is coming and the need to satisfy all the sacrificial demands is intense. People come in from all corners of Israel. They cannot carry all the livestock and birds that are demanded. Especially at this time the Temple becomes not only the most important place to worship God, but it also becomes a place to make huge amounts of money as well. Anyway, Jesus not only drives out these animal sellers, but overturns the tables of the moneychangers as well. You can almost hear the tinkle and crash of cascading coins flowing through the Temple. This is a major deal. Jesus is making a statement.

As I said, much has been written about this event such as: In getting so angry, Jesus seems very human to us; That this event is the one that directly leads to his death on a cross. But also, Jesus is telling us something about the Temple itself. Jesus is messing with the very symbol of the Herod regime. Instead of being a holy place, Jesus and most of the poor in Judea see the Temple as a location for exploiting the poor. No longer a symbol of God's love and justice, the Temple has become a serious distortion of Israel's calling toward the poor. Proclaiming the Good News of God's kingdom, healing the occasional leper, casting out the random demon is all well and good, but messing around the central locus of stability and worship—the place that God dwells—is another kettle of fish. Jesus, in a most spectacular and audacious way, makes himself extremely visible to the authorities—The temple authority, Herod's authority, and Roman authority.

Jesus had his reason for such a prophetic act. He was protesting the Temple's role in the domination system that was pervading all of Jewish life. When all is set right by God in the future, God will be out in the world for all to feel, see, and hear. God will no longer be locked away in a central location to which one has to travel. In fact, Jesus is saying that he will be the new temple. Access to God will not reside in a place or building, but in God incarnate—Jesus.

What is the message for us? I think it is that the place where you can hear God's voice can be anywhere. The place where you can listen to God's voice need not be in church. In fact, Sunday worship can be a difficult place to listen—hear yes—but listen...not so easy. But if we remember that Jesus is within all of us, giving us all access to God's voice

whether that voice comes from deep in our hearts or from another human being, we are liberated from the church building and our place of worship can be outside of church.

The idea of listening to God and worshipping outside of church is particularly important for me. I have been a verger at my parish church for 17 years and at the Washington National Cathedral for 12 years. A verger is a lay person who assists with worship. Indeed, I assist the Rev. Dr. Doggett when he is the chaplain-on-duty at the Cathedral. For the noon Eucharist at which Bill presides, I mark all the books, lay out the vestments, set the altar, read the readings, pray the prayers, serve the wine, take the count, wash the dishes, and turn out the lights. I truly am a butler in the house of God. At my parish church, St. Mark's Capitol Hill, I am a glorified stage manager overseeing all aspects of the services, thus freeing up the Presider to solely focus on leading the congregation into the mystery of faith. [If any of you are interested in being a verger—the Vergers Guild of the Episcopal Church has over a thousand members—see me after the service.]

But my point is that I spend a lot of time inside the church. I find I need a time to concentrate on finding a place in my daily life that I can hear God outside the church building. I need a Sabbath moment—a ceasing.

[Ushers distribute pictures]

Recently, one most powerful moment during which I have witnessed the voice of God outside the church was on Ash Wednesday during Ashes-to-Go. Ashes-to-Go particularly lends itself to an urban church such as St. Mark's. On Ash Wednesday at 8am with the temperature around 12 degrees, I set off with Father Josh Thomas to Capitol South metro station in order to impose ashes on those coming out of the Metro on the way to work.

Now I want you to look at the picture that was handed out of the young woman receiving ashes. If you look at the left side of the photograph, you see a general hubbub of people that have just come off the escalator, heading for their jobs. Some have their heads down...one is on the cell phone. But if continue your gaze to the right, you will see in the midst all that is going on, a woman who is experiencing a sabbath moment. She is ceasing. She has ceased hearing the babble behind her. She is now intently listening to those ancient words of God from the book of Genesis: "Dust thou art and to dust thou shall return." She has taken time out from a world teeming with vitality...she has ceased her mad dash to work...She is listening to God.

For me this is an amazing outside-the-church building moment. This young woman with her calm and beatific face makes a powerful picture. She is a living reminder of our duty to keep the Sabbath, however long we can. She has ceased her daily business. She is taking time out to reflect on her own mortality through truly listening...and you can tell she is truly listening just by looking at her face. By listening, this young lady binds herself not only to God but also to each and every one of us in our own dusty humanity. She challenges us to do the same.

She challenges us to be intentional about the way we keep the Sabbath so that we can listen to God. Now Lent is certainly the time in our church year for practicing our discipline. But here's the catch: The intentionality we strive for during Lent is really to be practiced all year long. We need to keep the Sabbath—that time of ceasing—throughout the year, throughout our lives really. It is a commandment, after all! We need to be reminded of God's presence in the world all the time. That takes practice. We are easily distracted. We need to take time out and de-clutter our hearts: "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me," says the psalmist in Psalm 51, an anthem for Lent. Put it another way, we need to spring clean our hearts to make room for God. Ceasing our busyness during our Sabbath is a major way of de-cluttering.

But we all know that spring-cleaning is a year long, no, **life long**, struggle. The discipline we test ourselves with these forty days is an intentionality that we need to carry with us for our lifetime. Then, during our Sabbath moments, whenever and wherever and however we make them, we take timeout to listen to voice of Jesus, declaring the good news of God, that His Kingdom **is** here, that we **are** people of love and justice, that we **are made** whole again.

Look once more at that saintly face in the picture of the young woman receiving the ashes.

Does she look whole, or what? She radiates wholeness. *Amen.*