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Pentecost 2

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

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“The “Three R’s” of the Sabbath: Rest, Remember, and Receive”  
Text: Deuteronomy 5:12-15; Mark 2:23-28; 2 Corinthians 4:5-12

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

The Sabbath Day is not about rest. It’s about holiness. **“Observe the Sabbath Day, to keep it holy,”** we heard from Moses in Deuteronomy. Rest is *involved* with that for us, because holiness is *not our work*. No matter how hard we try, no matter what we do, we cannot make ourselves, this day, or anything else holy. We’re sinners, and can only make things sinful. Holiness comes only from outside of us. Holiness belongs to God. **Holy, holy, holy** we sing of God in the Communion liturgy. Only He is holy and only He can give holy and make us holy.

The good news is that this is the very thing He *wants* to do. For this reason God sends His Holy Spirit. To holy us. To give us the gift of holiness. And so that we might stop and let holy happen; that we might rest and let someone else do this work; that we might come before our holy God and let Him serve us – that is why we are here. That is what the Divine Service is all about. And that is why the Sabbath Day. For though there is a commandment *about* it, the Sabbath is not a commandment, but a gift.

And that we might understand that, Moses points out what the children of God are to do as they rest on the Sabbath – they are to remember. They are to remember the great working of God in bringing them **“out of Egypt,”** and His gifts to them of rest and holiness. For they had been slaves in Egypt. And it was hard slavery. 430 years of slavery. And there was no rest. No days off. And no matter how hard they tried, or what they did, they could not free themselves from this slavery. Only God could. And God did. He acted to free His children. He acted to bring them out of slavery. He acted, and when He acted, He gave them rest. For this was His work. The people did not do anything. They simply saw the mighty and awesome acts of God for them. The plagues, the pillar of cloud and fire leading them, the Red Sea, the manna. He served them, brought them out, and gave them rest. All gift.

But not only that, for as I said before, the Sabbath is not about rest, but about holiness. And holiness is also what God gave to His people **out of Egypt**. For after bringing them

out, they came to Mt. Sinai. . . . Now whenever most people hear of Mt. Sinai they think of the Ten Commandments! And while the Ten Commandments *were* given there (Ex 20), they are not all that was given there. God also gave His people the gift of the Tabernacle (Ex 24ff) – the place where God would dwell with His people, to forgive their sins and give them His holiness. And so for the sins that the Ten Commandments would reveal, there would be forgiveness. There would be holy. A holy God and a holy people. All God's doing. All His gift. The people could not be holy, and they could not do holy, but they could receive it. And to give it is exactly what God wanted to do. God serving His people and setting them free.

But it seems that God's people always have trouble receiving His gifts! We want to be the doers and the givers, not the receivers. Which is to say, *we want to be the gods*. And so Adam and Eve, not satisfied with receiving the gift of *all* the trees of the Garden except one, take and eat from the one that the devil promises "*will make them like God.*" The children of Israel after coming *out of Egypt* quickly exchanged the Divine Service of God for their own bovine service of the golden calf. And the Pharisees in the Gospel we heard today changed the Sabbath from the *gift* of God to us into something we do for God! For even resting is something they turned into what they did for God, instead of receiving it as a gift from Him. . . .

And we do it too. Many people. Thinking that coming to church on Sunday is what we do for God; our service to Him, instead of His service to us. *Our* praise, *our* prayers, *our* thanks, *our* worship. That is why you will so often hear the phrase: *I don't have to go to church to serve God*. I can do those things anywhere. And while that's true, **is that why we come to church?** To serve God? Is this *our* doing or is it God's doing? Do we here give or receive? Are we here to serve or to be served?

Well God gave us the answer through Moses: **out of Egypt**. *We come here to get out of Egypt, and to get Egypt out of us*. For we are slaves to a far worse taskmaster than Egypt, and need rescue by a far greater work than the Exodus. And we are here to remember that that's what God has done for us. For the Son of God came down into our Egypt of sin and brought us out of our *slavery to sin* with His mighty hands and arms outstretched on the cross. Laying down His life for us. . . . And to remember that means more than just to perform a mental act – *it is to take our place in the story*. It is to be there, for Jesus our Saviour is here. And so here we are hodied, for the *new* Tabernacle of God, the new dwelling of God among His people, the flesh and blood of Jesus, is here for us. God here for us, to forgive our sins and give us His holiness. That our slavery might be no more, and we rest in Him. And it's all gift. God serving us. God saving us.

And so it is in this way that Luther explains this commandment in the Small Catechism:

*We should fear and love God so that we do not despise preaching and His Word, but hold it sacred and gladly hear and learn it.* For Luther knew this commandment is about the Word of God, for it is the Word of God that brings us out of Egypt and takes Egypt out of us. It is the Word of God that puts us in God and God in us. And so the Word of God in the water of Holy Baptism puts us in Christ. The Word of God in the bread and wine of Holy Communion puts Christ's body and blood in us. The preaching of the Word of God puts us in the story of God's people and the story in us, that all the promises of God are His promises *to us*. And in all these ways, through all these means, the Holy Spirit comes to us, with forgiveness and faith, with life and salvation, and gives us the gift of holy. All we need do is rest. To come before God and let Him serve us. The Word of God, the Word made flesh, once crucified but now risen from the dead, here bringing us out of Egypt. Here living and giving, saving and serving. You can't do it. As Paul said, ***"this surpassing power belongs to God and not to us."*** Holiness belongs to God. And He is here to give it to you.

Because God is not about rules – He's about life. He gives the Law to kill us and bring us low, *so that* the Gospel can give us life and raise us. Too often we get that upside down and backwards, and so we wind up trying to serve God and rest before our neighbors instead of resting before God and serving our neighbors! *We confuse the commandment with the gift!* You see, that was the Pharisees' problem. When it came to the Sabbath, they focused on what *they* did, *their* work, instead of what *God* was doing, *His* work. And so Jesus reorients them, and us. ***The Sabbath was made for man***, for our benefit; ***not man for the Sabbath***, to enslave us to God.

Which is good, because quite frankly, you've got enough to do in this life! With job and family and friends and home and health and worries and everything else in life that wears us down and wears us out. The Son of God didn't come to increase your burden, but to take your burden away. Not to give you more to do, but to give you the strength you need. Not to run you around, but to give you rest. To give His life for the life of the world. So that, as Paul wrote: you be afflicted but not crushed; perplexed but not driven to despair; persecuted but not forsaken; struck down but not destroyed.

And so David and his men came into the house of God and ate, the bread of the presence, that they might have life. Jesus and His disciples picked and ate the heads of grain, their daily bread, that they might have life. And we too come into the house of God and eat, the bread of life, that we might have life.

For just as for Old Testament Israel every Sabbath Day was to be a new Exodus, so for us every Sabbath Day is a new Easter! A day of resurrection and new life. A day of remembering, resting, and receiving the mighty and awesome work of your Saviour for

you. His death and resurrection for you. His life and forgiveness for you. His holy for you. All gift. That *you* might live as His new creation, both now and forevermore.

In the Name of the Father and of the (+) Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.