

Sermon for 2-4-18
Mark 1:29-39; Psalm 147
The Rev. Maggie Leidheiser-Stoddard, Rector
Christ Episcopal Church

We humans are creatures of rhythm. I don't mean rhythm as in music and dancing -- that would be a potentially embarrassing topic for me -- but rhythm as in how we measure and understand time. We define ourselves and our institutions by number of years in existence -- I am 36 years old; Christ Church is 183 years old; our nation is 241 years old. Each one of those years marks one full revolution of our earth around the sun, and one full cycle through the four seasons of winter, spring, summer and fall. On a more familiar scale, we organize our activities around the rhythm of the 24-hour day, the time it takes our spinning earth to make one full rotation on its axis. This 24-hour rotation gives us the rhythms of morning and evening, high noon and midnight, sunrise and sunset.

But what about the seven-day week? The seven-day week governs our times of work and leisure, our regular commitments, our "to-do" lists and planners, and, of course, our worship. Unlike the 365-day year and the 24-hour day, though, the seven-day week has no natural or scientific basis. The rhythm of the week, which so deeply permeates the living of our lives, is an entirely cultural (not astronomical) rhythm -- or, as I prefer to call it, a spiritual rhythm.

Cultures in ancient China, Japan, and Mesopotamia adopted seven-day week concepts based on the seven celestial bodies they knew -- the sun, moon, Mars, Mercury, Jupiter, Venus, and Saturn.ⁱ The ancient Jews, however, based their understanding of the week on the seven-day creation account that begins the book of Genesis... or, more accurately, the six-day creation account; because God creates the universe in six days, and then "hallows" a seventh day to rest from the work of creation.ⁱⁱ Scholars believe early versions of the Genesis creation account were circulating as far back as the 9th century before Christ -- long before any other known models of a seven-day week.ⁱⁱⁱ So it is fair to say that the rhythm of the seven-day week, which governs so much of our lives today, is rooted in the enormous, creative, life-giving action of God in Creation.

You may be wondering what all this has to do with our Scriptures for today. A fair question, particularly since none of our readings say anything about the Sabbath day or the seven-day week. It's not obvious, but if we dig a bit deeper we realize that these readings tell us much about the ideal rhythms of our lives.

These verses from the Gospel of Mark follow immediately after those from last Sunday, when we heard of Jesus entering the synagogue, teaching "as one with authority," and casting out an unclean spirit.^{iv} This was a Sabbath day (that's why people were gathered at the synagogue in the first place). Today's passage begins on the same day, right after the episode with the unclean spirit. Jesus and his disciples leave the synagogue and go to Simon Peter's home, where Simon's mother-in-law is gravely ill. The Scripture says she was "in bed with a fever," which may not sound too serious to our modern ears until we remember that this was a time before Tylenol and 24-hour urgent care; and in any case, the Greek word translated here as *fever* was used for a variety of ailments. This woman was seriously ill, and Jesus heals her with a simple touch.^v

At sundown, the Scripture tells us, "the whole city was gathered around the door."^{vi} Apparently, word about Jesus has spread so quickly that by evening of the same day, all the sick people in the city are waiting outside Simon Peter's home, having been brought there by families and friends with hopes for healing. And Jesus does what he does, his God-work -- he heals those who are sick, he casts out demons and restores people to wholeness. Yet more proof, if anyone needs it, that he is the Anointed One.

Early the next morning, before sunrise, Jesus makes a run for it! He doesn't tell anyone where he's going, but at the same time, he is not trying to abandon his work. He might have been feeling tired or depleted after the events of the previous day; we can't be sure. We know that he "went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed."^{vii} Jesus takes time away from his work -- the most important work that anyone has ever done -- to refresh his spirit, to renew his divine energy, to connect with God. It is only after this time of renewal, this personal Sabbath, that Jesus is ready to go to the neighboring towns and spread the Good News of love and mercy and healing and salvation, to do "what [he] came out to do."^{viii}

The spiritual rhythm demonstrated by Jesus in these verses is the same rhythm we are called to live as his followers. Jesus is fully present among the people; he feels their pain and bears their burdens, he heals and restores and transforms; this is his work. We, too, have our work. If we are teachers, we teach; if we are chefs, we feed; if we are gardeners, we tend; if we are artists, we create. If we are children, our work is to learn and to play; if we are parents, our work is to raise up precious children; if we are retired, our work is to use our wisdom and experience to love the world as best we can. Our work may be righteous (and indeed, our lives are better when we know our work is a part of something good). But even the most righteous, holy, God-serving work can be exhausting. Even the work of love can be tiring at times.

Jesus takes time away from his work, time to pray and be with God, Sabbath time. The needs of the world have not disappeared, but Jesus allows himself time to rest in communion with God. Perhaps this is because Jesus knows what the Scripture tells us, and yet many of us refuse to accept -- that Sabbath time, resting-in-God time, is not a luxury but a necessity. Let me say that again -- Sabbath time is not a luxury but a **necessity**. We are human beings, created by God and reflecting God's image, and we cannot live fully and wholeheartedly if we do not recharge our spiritual batteries, if we do not take time to rest in the presence of our Maker.

That is why we are here this morning, isn't it? We come here every Sunday, every seventh day to worship and sing and pray and rest in the presence of God. We come here to lay down our burdens at the foot of the cross, to be embraced in Christ's loving arms, to be nourished and strengthened by the proclamation of the Gospel and the holy meal of Christ's self-sacrificing love. This is our weekly rhythm -- work and Sabbath, service and rest. When this rhythm is disrupted, when we neglect Sabbath because we elevate anything else over our need to connect with our Maker, we are left with empty batteries. Human beings without Sabbath are creations who do not know their Creator's love, and that is a sad and lonesome way to live.

The restoration we experience through our weekly Sabbath strengthens and enables us to do great things. They may not be great by the world's standards, but they are great in the eyes of the One who "counts the number of the stars and calls them all by their names," the One who "has no pleasure in the strength of a man," the One who "heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds."^{ix} Just look at what Simon Peter's mother-in-law does after her restoration: "she began to serve them."^x

She began to serve them... I have to admit, when I first read these words, I felt disappointed. This woman has been healed by the touch of Christ's hand, and she has no powerful testimony, no proclamation of God's goodness, no vows to follow Jesus for the rest of her days? But, as is often the case, I had misunderstood.

The significance of this 'serving' activity is clear in the Greek. The verb is *diakonia* - yes, the source of the English *deacon*. In the Episcopal tradition, deacons are charged with calling the people of God to acknowledge and address the needs of the wider world, because the essence of *diakonia* is prayerful and generous service to others. Simon Peter's mother-in-law isn't the only one engaged in *diakonia* in this first chapter of Mark's Gospel... After Jesus's baptism, when he is tempted by Satan in the desert for 40 days, Mark tells us that he "was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him."^{xi} *Diakonia* -- when the angels watch over and protect and tend to Jesus during his time in the wilderness, they are doing *diakonia*. So *diakonia* is holy and sacred, it is angels' work.

Just as Peter's mother-in-law is healed and renewed by Jesus and then begins the work of angels, we also are fed and then sent by Christ. May we, who are continually restored and strengthened by Him, carry our refreshed spirits out to do good in the world during the week, and return to be nourished again in this place next week. Let us share our Sabbath, and then, let us do the work of angels! Amen.

ⁱ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/0/20394641>

ⁱⁱ Genesis 2:3 *NRSV*

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Week#History>

^{iv} Mark 1:22

^v Mark 1:30

-
- vi Mark 1:33
 - vii Mark 1:35
 - viii Mark 1:38
 - ix Psalm 147:4, 11, 3
 - x Mark 1:31
 - xi Mark 1:13