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**We're No Angels!**

**Exodus 20: 8-11**

Why not a little Christmas in July? In 1955, Michael Curtiz, who directed the famed *Casablanca*, teamed with Humphrey Bogart again to produce, of all things, a Christmas comedy. Bogart, paired with Peter Ustinov and the incomparably droll Aldo Ray, were three convicts who had escaped from Devil's Island and made their way to a small French colonial village, where they found the one store in town that allowed goods to be purchased on credit. The three convicts quickly realized that the store was run by a bumbling, but amazingly good-hearted merchant and his beautiful, if naïve and innocent daughter. Naturally, the convicts intended to take advantage of the merchant's goodwill, but since it was Christmas, and there were no boats leaving the island, the convicts were more or less forced to celebrate the holy day with the merchant and his daughter. Exposed to the generosity of the merchant and the graciousness of his daughter, the convicts soon found their hearts turning from evil to good. More accurately, I should say that the convicts used their ability for evil to do good. They cooked the merchant's books so it looked as if the store was turning a tremendous profit. They swindled and stole their way to creating a fantastic Christmas dinner. And their pet snake happened to kill a couple of people, but these happened to be the sort of people for whom death by snakebite was fair justice. By movie's end, having celebrated Christmas with this good family and having done much good to set the merchant's life aright, the three convicts decided to return to prison to finish their sentences. The last scene is of the three of them walking back to jail. The title of this subtle Christmas classic? "We're No Angels"

Simply put, the celebration of the Sabbath, like the celebration of Christmas, is meant to improve our hearts from evil to good, is intended to change our souls for the better. But, oddly enough, some scholars suggest that originally, at least in many ancient cultures, the observance of the Sabbath was meant not so much to make humanity act more angelic as it was to prevent the divine from acting more demonically. As strange as it may sound to you, contrary to Las Vegas logic, many ancient people regarded the number seven as terribly unlucky. To this day, many nomadic Middle Eastern tribes will not even pronounce the word "seven." Many ancient cultures believed that the seventh day belonged to the gods and was a day inhospitable to humanity, a day when it was dangerous and ultimately unprofitable to work. Out of fear of being vulnerable to the demonic powers that ran amok on the seventh day, and out of a desire to placate the potentially good divine forces that might benefit them, ancient people started refusing to engage in normal work on the seventh day of the week. Ironically, the Canaanites, the people conquered by the Israelites in taking the so-called Promised Land, were among those particularly keen in observing the seventh day as a day of absolute rest, so as to escape the violence of the gods. Yet the Hebrews introduced a key innovation: whereas the Canaanites and others saw the seventh day as a negative day of abstention, the Israelites saw the day positively, as a festival, a celebration of God's goodness and the wonder of creation.

Of course, though the Sabbath was meant to be a festival, we know that over time the Sabbath observance became weighed down by legalism, so that by the time of Jesus, the rabbis opined that if one took a sip of vinegar and gargled it over a sore tooth and then spit the vinegar out, that was impermissible on the Sabbath because it was taking medicine and taking medicine was work. If however, you engaged in the same action on the Sabbath and then swallowed the vinegar, that was okay, because that activity paralleled the taking of food. However, though it is generally recognized that Sabbath observance eventually lapsed into a deadening legalism, it is also true, though not so recognized, that Sabbath observance saved the entire Jewish culture. You might say, preacher, that is pure hyperbole. How could Sabbath observance save a culture? Consider this scene. All Jewish leaders of note in the southern Jewish kingdom, along with their families, had been exiled by the Babylonians into a strange land. The ten tribes of Israel were no more, having already been annihilated by the Assyrians. Jerusalem was in rubble, the temple was in ruins. The Jewish leaders wondered: how could they maintain their identity when they were surrounded by prosperous, successful, industrious people who worshipped a different divinity? They decided to maintain their distinctiveness by focusing upon the Law of Moses, most particularly by accentuating the setting aside of a day to honor God. They oriented their cultural life around the celebration of the Sabbath, freeing themselves to bond to God and to each other. It is no exaggeration to say that the Sabbath observance saved the Hebrew people from extinction.

Now I offer that historical lesson because I want to pose to you a question. What if the believers of that exiled faith community had said that religion was really a private matter between one's self and God? What if they had insisted that religion was purely an individual matter? What if they had said that there was no need to gather corporately to congregate and worship together? Answer: they would have lost their cultural and religious identity! The Hebrew people would have ceased to exist as a community of faith. Sure, there would be a number of people practicing a privatized spirituality, but a privatized spirituality doesn't produce enough spiritual glue to bind a people to God and to each other. Eventually, without a communal commitment to the Sabbath, the Hebrew people would have lost their historical definition as the covenant heirs of Abraham's promise.

Last week we talked of the Sabbath's sacred rest as a personal gift to us as individuals, a gift of rest, a gift of relaxation, a gift of interruption, a gift of grace, a gift of judgment, a gift of patience and habit. All of that is true. However, we do well to remember that the Fourth Commandment is not primarily addressed to individuals! When God advises us, "Thou shalt remember the Sabbath and keep it holy," we are being addressed primarily as a community of faith. Keeping the Sabbath holy is a communal call to celebration, a communal call to worship, a communal call to responsibility, a communal call to action. God intends for the gift of sacred rest to be a magnet that draws people together to act and interact with each other at the most profound level of existence.

Of course, the modern secular individual begs to differ with my interpretation of the Sabbath's purpose. Such people tolerate those of us who commit to participation in communal worship, but they feel no such need for congregational interaction and are proud of their detachment from the faithful herd.

When people discover that I'm a minister, they give me all sorts of excuses why they aren't active in church. Oh, they're spiritual, they say, but they're not religious. I've heard all sorts of variations on the theme, "I'm spiritual, but I get closer to God on the golf course than I ever do at church." Alternative versions include, "I get closer to God in my boat, closer to God at the beach, closer to God on my bike, closer to God watching a sunset in my mountain house than I do during an organized religious service."

They might well be right. There are a host of experiences in the great wide world that bring God's reality home to us in a singular and piercing way.

But they are only truly meaningful and transforming if they can be shared within the context of participation in a faith community.

The old preacher Elton Trueblood hit the nail on the head when he said most people are guilty of what he called, "the angelic fallacy."

A fair number of people really do pretend that they are angels, when in truth, they, like we, are weak, flawed human beings.

Oh, we have high ideals and lofty expectations of ourselves, but we are flawed and weak in practice.

If we were angels we would not need the communal support that a faith community gives us.

If we were angels we wouldn't need to be reminded of our weakness to a myriad of temptations.

If we were angels we would not need to be mentored by each other's examples.

But we're no angels!

We constantly require what the great writer Samuel Johnson called the "incitements to do well" that communal worship provides.

Let's be real. I will admit that sinking a long birdie putt, or hauling in a ten-pound bass, or working in your garden on a Sabbath, might well qualify as a religious experience.

Such an experience might even point one in a positive, sublime spiritual direction.

*But if one doesn't act upon that impulse to see a faith relationship, then that point has no point!*

One might say, 'Preacher, the person in that bass boat or on the golf course or working in the garden on the Sabbath, may be no more self-centered than the person sitting in a pew holding a communion cracker.'

Perhaps, but there's a distinguishing difference: the person in the bass boat or on the golf course or in the garden does not know how self-centered and self-absorbed he or she is, and thus does nothing about it.

The person holding a symbol of Christ's broken body and the purity of the divine love in his hands cannot help but be aware of his self-centeredness and feel a holy shame that moves him toward repentance.

That's what Samuel Johnson is talking about when he talks of us needing continual incitements to do well.

*The Sabbath has a paradox: it communicates to us the fact that we're no angels, even as it opens us up to the power and presence of God that makes us a little more angelic.*

The modern secular person says, "Look, I work hard six days, and Sunday is my day for fun."

I have no problem with fun. But I remind you that because we're no angels, when we turn fun into our sole focus, we have the ability to turn even fun into drudgery.

The *Atlantic* magazine featured an article on leisure in which it noted that in days of yore our jobs required us to develop considerable competence, skill and concentration to meet the challenge of work. Thus, recreation was simply an outlet for escape and fun.

But many people now find their jobs unfulfilling, non-demanding, mentally and physically dull.

So, for many people, weekend recreation becomes the one area where they try to develop competence.

How quickly then, fun ceases to be fun! Then leisure becomes yet another job.

The kayaker must perfect certain moves in order to keep pace with others in the club.

The biker must pedal a certain number of miles just to keep up with his peers.

The golfer must maintain a certain handicap to keep his safe esteem.

The bass fisherman has to catch so many pounds a weekend to maintain bragging rights.

When our self-amusement becomes the primary focus of our life, fun ceases to be fun. After winning a Super Bowl and making tons of money, Mike Ditka retired from coaching so he could live out his supposed dream of playing golf every day. After a couple of months he said to his wife, "My 9-iron is getting better, but my life is getting worse." Fun had ceased to be fun!

"Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy!" Remember! Remember the Sabbath is God's gift. The great writer G. K. Chesterton once observed that leisure can be defined as three freedoms. There is the freedom to do something, the freedom to do anything and the freedom to do nothing.

For the believer, the Sabbath combines all three freedoms:

we are freed to do "nothing else" but remember and enjoy the sacred rest and in doing so we accomplish the "something" of communing with God and with each other, thereby receiving the power to change ourselves and to transform the world.

The Sabbath really is a parable of freedom, and a parable of life.

What we do with our freedom reflects our attitude toward our life and toward God.

When we come to worship, we give God a small gift of our time, and in so doing we acknowledge that all of our time is God's time.

When we come to worship God we offer God a sliver of our life, and in so doing we acknowledge that all of our life is God's.

The great Catholic saint Thomas Aquinas once observed that the secret to living a virtuous life is not in doing something difficult but in habitually doing something good.

The Sabbath is the habitual use of our freedom to do the good of communing with God and with each other.

In so doing we realize another of the Sabbath's paradoxes:

*as we do "nothing" but enjoy the Sabbath rest and open ourselves for the "something" of praising God, we find the spiritual energy to do all things through Christ.*

Some years ago I read an essay by a Jewish woman who, like many of us, grew up in a strict religious upbringing.

She recalled how at sunset on Friday she was forced by her father to put down her pencil.

She couldn't do homework until the Sabbath was over.

Of course, when she went away to college, she rejected the religious principles of her parents; then she was free to do homework on Saturday!

In giving up her Sabbath observance, she thought she was expressing her freedom, but part of her knew better.

She knew, deep down inside, that she was actually surrendering something vital.

That point became clear to her one Saturday morning when she was harried and hurried, trying to make a meeting with a friend, and passed two Orthodox Jews

walking to synagogue, obviously engaged in intimate, meaningful conversation.

She asked herself sadly, who is more free?

Those who are free for anything, and thus free to become enslaved by everything, or those who are freed by the Sabbath for God and for others?

Could it be that those who know they are not angels,

and thus make time for communion with God and other people, are able to enjoy a dimension and depth of meaning

that those who reject the spiritual realm can never approach?

At the end of the movie, "We're No Angels," as Bogart, Ustinov and Ray walk back toward the jail, above each of their heads, a small halo appears.

A tiny halo even appears above the head of the little snake.  
The observance of Christmas among godly people has had that effect upon them.  
May our remembrance of the Sabbath have the same effect upon us.  
We're no angels. But communing with God's presence in concert with each other  
can give our character an affinity with the divine  
that moves us toward the very One who gifted us with life.

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