

Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18

Mark 2:23-3:6

“Ordinary Times, Extraordinary Measures”

June 3, 2018

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For those of you who grew up in, or were ever a part of, more liturgical church traditions, you are probably familiar with the lectionary. The lectionary is a calendar of prescribed scripture readings for every day of the year, including Sundays. If you are a preacher who follows the lectionary, then when Monday rolls around, you're not trying to figure out which chapter and verse of the Bible you're going to preach on next, because the chapter and verse has already been given to you. I have found that preaching from the lectionary has both its benefits and challenges. The benefit, if you choose to see it this way, is that the lectionary keeps us from treating the Bible like it's an apple tree from which we only have to choose the easiest to reach passages (if there are any such passages). We can't just preach the 23rd Psalm and David and Goliath and For God So Love the World every week. We're also going to have to do time with the 22nd Psalm and with David and Bathsheba and with all the Bible characters who want to know, where in the world has God's love gone? Follow the lectionary and we're going to have to wander into unfamiliar and uncomfortable territory at times. At the same time, the challenge with the lectionary is that it can't take us everywhere we need to go. The lectionary doesn't know which school communities are going to see tragedy strike this week, or who is going to get diagnosed with cancer, or which churches are going to celebrate the joy of a new baby or a new minister, and when Sunday rolls around we need God's word to go where our lives have taken us, and that may mean needing to leave the lectionary behind. Here among you, I preach from the lectionary about 60% of the Sundays. I'm preaching from the lectionary this morning and from Mark chapter 2 and Psalm 139. Taken together, these passages form the bookends for what the lectionary calls the start of Ordinary Time. Last week was Trinity Sunday, the Sunday before that was Pentecost Sunday (we filled the sanctuary with balloons and red banners; there was nothing ordinary about that day). The 6 Sundays before Pentecost were called the Sundays of Easter, and of course, just 9 weeks ago was Easter. Which makes today the start of Ordinary Time. Now it ought to be said that not everyone marks today as the start of Ordinary Time. If you look at the top of your bulletin,

you'll see that it says today is the Ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time. So, which is it? Is today the first Sunday in Ordinary Time or the ninth Sunday? I guess it all depends upon how you want to see it. For some of us Easter feels like it came and went a long time ago. That today may be the first day in "ordinary time" makes us laugh, because today feels a lot like yesterday and the day before that and the day before that. Every day is ordinary and we just wish it wasn't. For others of us, it maybe comes as good news, like a sweepstakes winner, that today is the start of something ordinary. Finally, things are slowing down, leveling off.

So, which is it? Is today the 1st or 9th Sunday in Ordinary Time? I don't suppose it matters much. Either way you look at it, we are now into what is called the "ordinary," and according to the lectionary we're going to be here for—now brace yourselves—for the next 24 weeks. Which brings us to this story from Mark's gospel about Jesus and his disciples, a story in which two rather ordinary things are happening.

One is that it is a Sabbath. If we learned anything about the meaning of Sabbath when we were children, it was probably from reading the story of creation in Genesis. "In six days God created the heavens and the earth, and on the seventh day God rested." Some people like to argue that 6 days means 6 days of 24 hours each, and maybe it was or maybe it wasn't. I don't think it matters at all. The greater point is, the world didn't come into being all at once. Nothing ever worth doing happens all at once. God worked hard day after day after day—carving out oceans, raising mountains, sculpting the armadillo and aardvark, planting daffodils—keeping at it until God could say, that's good. And then, God needed to rest. Because what could be more natural and ordinary after working than resting? We've long been told that the human body needs a solid 8 hours of sleep every night. The older I get the more I find myself at the doctor's office talking about things I never had to talk about before. How this part aches and why doesn't my system seem to fire on all cylinders the way it used to. "Do you think there's something wrong with me?" I'll ask my doctor. "Maybe we should schedule a test." And invariably the doctor will ask me, "How much sleep are you getting each night?" Never underestimate the value of a good night's sleep. It is perhaps the most ordinary thing we do, to rest. The irony, of course, is that for something that is so ordinary, so necessary, so essential to our being, we hardly ever do it—rest that is. And perhaps this is why, when God first introduces the idea

of Sabbath to the world, God doesn't make it a recommendation, but a command. God doesn't say, it would be a good idea if you could try and squeeze in a day of rest. No, God says, you shall keep a Sabbath. The first time we hear the command given it is being delivered by God to the Israelites. Following their many years of slavery in Egypt, as they pass through the wilderness on their way to freedom, God tells them through Moses,

“Remember the Sabbath. For 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 foreigner living in your town.”

Doesn't seem right, does it, that God should have to command former slaves to rest. Except that when we have become so accustomed to working, and working for someone else, it can seem unnatural to rest. And God knows this, that even in a land of freedom, one can forget that they are free, and not only will they work, work, work, but they—the former slaves will become slave drivers and make others work, work, work. Which is why the command is to not only rest yourself, but also to rest your family, your slaves, your animals, and the immigrants and refugees as well. As theologian and Kentucky farmer Wendell Berry tells us:

“We have lived our lives by the assumption that what was good for us would be good for the world. We have been wrong. We must change our lives so that it will be possible to live by the contrary assumption, that what is good for the world will be good for us. And that requires that we make the effort to know the world and learn what is good for it.”

We can't get to know what is good for the world or our neighbor in the world, though, if we are only ever thinking about what is good for us. One day a week then everyone should stop and do nothing. At least one day a week we should let our defenses down, shove our resume in a drawer, lock up our laptop, take a detour away from ourselves to go and be with the world, to let ourselves be known apart from any of the thing we have accomplished, apart from our usefulness, to be who we were before we became who we are now.

This is, I think, the message of the 139th Psalm, and the reason the lectionary assigns it to us alongside a passage about keeping the Sabbath. In the 139th Psalm, David has been

swept up in a moment of sheer wonder as he realizes there is someone who knows him inside and out, someone who knew him before he became King David, before he was promoted to general and commanded a whole army of soldiers, before he committed adultery with another man's wife, before he made any earthly contributions to this world, while he was still in his mother's womb. God, God knew him, and God said, you are fearfully and wonderfully made! Let this sink in. You are wonderful, and not because you are useful to anyone, and not because you are accomplished, but just because that is who the God of the Universe says you are.

This may come as a surprise to you, but I have never believed in the necessity of church...for anything...including for keeping the Sabbath. If you want to keep the Sabbath, you don't have to come to church, because keeping the Sabbath is not about coming to church. (So there, now we can all stay home and sleep in next week!) But if we do want to keep the Sabbath, if we want to discover rest for our body, and rest for our spirit, and rest for our souls, there are few better places to come to each week than right here. For church can be a place of sheer wonder, a place where ordinary people can come with their ordinary lives, and for an hour or two lay aside their less-than-ordinary burdens, and rest in the joy of hearing someone say, Wow! Would you just look at you? You are fearfully and wonderfully made!

There is one last word to say, before we gather ourselves and one another to the table. If you look at our gospel reading for today we see that on this ordinary Sabbath day, something else quite ordinary is going on: Jesus and his disciples are picking wheat in a field, for they are hungry and they want something to eat. Eating. What could be more ordinary to us than eating, than feeding one another? Except Jesus is told by those who think they know better what today is for that today is not a day to pick wheat and work the fields and feed the hungry.

"We work, work, work all week long. Today is the Sabbath, a day to rest."

"Rest? And not feed the hungry?" says Jesus. "What kind of Sabbath is that? For how can there be rest if the hungry must go on being hungry?"

Beloved, if we would keep this Sabbath day, my friends, and truly honor God, let us rest today in the knowledge that we are fearfully and wonderfully made. But let us not rest until the hungry are fed. Amen.