

TREATING THE EARTH AS A PERSON, Part 2

Luke 3: 1-6; Exodus 20: 8-11; Leviticus 25: 1-5, 18-22

If we put all the passages together in the bible that depict the earth, what is the picture we get? The earth is depicted as a person just like we humans are persons. So what makes a person? Well, a person to be a person must have some freedom, agency and choice. To be robbed of agency or choice is to be dehumanized because you are treated like a thing to be used rather than a person with some freedom to choose. Last Sunday we saw how God invites the earth and nature's forces to be part of the creational process, and by "letting" them be part of it, God grants them freedom to choose participation. Because they so choose, we have creation and God steps back to behold it all and is delighted at how good it all is. Mother earth as she is called in the 2nd chapter of Genesis (*Adamah*) is a partner with God in creation. Humankind is created in the image of God, we're also told. What does this tell us about how we are to relate as persons with mother earth as God's images? If you weren't here last Sunday check out last week's service and sermon on our website.

Today we continue to explore how earth as our mother is a person in another way that is also essential in the bible. And to get at this we need to understand something more that we all need as persons: Sabbath. I was just hearing in the news about a global "fast fashion" company called Shein. It has just gone public selling shares worth an estimated 24 billion dollars. One of the biggest criticisms of the company, besides the massive harm to the earth caused by the fast fashion industry itself, is that its employees are paid very little and often work seven days a week to make ends meet. Maybe they're not enslaved, but without any space in their lives for sabbath rest are they not being dehumanized? Are they not being robbed of something essential to their health, their well-being, their personhood?

And to get at all this more deeply, let's dive into our scripture readings this morning in search of revelatory wisdom. On this second Sunday of Advent our lectionary readings zero in on the figure of John the Baptist and his message of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. What sins are we called to repent of? Too often, we have read the scriptures and passages like this one as individuals first. It's a personal repentance we have to make. The sins are about shortcomings that affect us as individual persons before God as if our relationship with God can be isolated from our relationship with all other life. But the ancient Hebrews understood the call to repentance collectively as much as they did personally. They were called to repent as a people and in their relationships as people with all life as much as they were called to repent as individual persons before God.

But to repent of what? For the people, repentance was about their faithlessness before God by failing to rise up and live into their call to be a light to the nations. For the privileged and those in power repentance was about the abuse of power to create and perpetuate a system of injustice, greed and violence that ensured their wealth and privilege were gained by keeping the masses enslaved to seven day a week work. Even though as Hebrews they observed a sabbath day, by having to work to exhaustion just to survive, how could they observe the sabbath properly as a day of rest and as time, space and energy to properly enjoy food, family time and time to gather and build community together? Keeping people ground down and exhausted by overwork ensured people only had energy and time to focus on themselves and their survival above their neighbour. It's much easier keeping people enslaved by dehumanizing them and robbing them of any spirit to resist, to hope for something better, and to work together as neighbours rather than compete with each other for every morsel of bread in a dog-eat-dog existence.

And so, the call to sabbath is a revolutionary call against systems of injustice that perpetuate a work till your drop ethic and a morality of busyness. Such systems

also perpetuate the kind of thinking that says anything less than constant busyness is considered laziness and a luxury no one should be privileged to afford, except those who benefit from such a system – the wealthy, the powerful and the comfortable. They've earned their sabbath rest, while the rest of the world must work till they drop, if they have any work, that is.

And so, once we become aware of the larger, systemic realities of John's time, we may see how threatening his message of repentance could be for the authorities who come to check him out. John's call to repentance is a call for people to rise up and hope for something better. The promise of forgiveness is the promise of new beginnings, of new hopes for a better future for the many who are down and out.

At the same time the call to repentance is a public denouncement of the authorities who themselves are called to repent of their double standards and hypocrisy, wanting to blame the people for their poverty and destitution as God's judgement on them, rather than facing their own guilt for creating the poverty-generating systems. And so, the call to repentance is meant to provoke people who are down to rise up and demand better for themselves and their world. The power of guilt and blame the authorities wield over them is also being undermined by John's brazen confrontation of their hypocrisy. You see how it goes?

So then, sabbath rest is not just a personal and individual choice but a public responsibility for every society for the well being of human life and all life. And in case we need a little more convincing and clarity about all this, let us take a deeper dive into our Old Testament scriptures, shall we?

First of all we have the commandment to "remember the sabbath day" in Exodus, which is one of the 10 commandments given to Moses by God. The sabbath day is a day of the week where everyone must rest from work. And this rest is not just

for the purpose of taking a break and recharging. It is also a day to be devoted to spiritual nourishment with family, neighbour and community. The sabbath day is “a sabbath to the Lord your God”. Imagine how revolutionary it is to stop the machine of production and work, and for people to have the time and space for rest and for gathering together, to reflect, to worship and pray, to sing and dance and create beauty for beauty’s sake before God and each other. It is also a time to agitate for change together as people. And imagine all this being treated as consecrated time. It’s as revolutionary a concept in our world today as it was in biblical times. Imagine if we organized our society and the rules of work inscribing sabbath as a commandment to be observed without question. Imagine!

But here’s a further revolutionary thing. The sabbath day is not just a command for those who are well-to-do and those who own the farms and businesses and can afford the time. It is a command for everyone. Society must create that privilege for everyone, not just for some. And who is everyone? What persons are including in the naming? It is for “you, your son, your daughter, your servants, your livestock, the refugee residing in your towns...” Everything and everyone alive are treated the same as persons before God. Everyone must be given the freedom to observe the sabbath for themselves. Women as much as men, servants as much as masters, refugees as much as citizens, animals as much as humans. Everyone! Why? “For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea and all that is in them, but rested on the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.” If the Creator God is to rest, all life is to rest. No ifs, ands, or buts about it!

OK, but this also brings us to the final point which is, in many ways, the most revolutionary of all. The concept of everyone is expanded even further in our reading from Leviticus. Leviticus is a whole book of commandments that spell out in greater detail how the 10 commandments are to be observed. And in terms of the sabbath and sabbath rest to be observed, it also applies to the land as much as

it applies to creatures of all kinds. We're all in this together – God, the earth and all creatures great and small. God through Moses tells the people: “When you enter the land that I am giving you, the land shall observe a sabbath for the Lord. For six years you shall sow your field, and for six years you shall prune your vineyard, and gather in their yield; but in the seventh year there shall be a sabbath of complete rest for the land, a sabbath for the Lord...” This means the people must plan for this by storing extra harvest in the previous years so that they have enough for the seventh year.

But there's something else here that is, perhaps, the most important message for us of all if we pay attention to how the command is framed: “When you enter the land that I am giving you, **the land shall observe** a sabbath for the Lord.” Just like every person must observe a sabbath to the Lord, whatever their gender, race or social class, and just like the animals of all kinds are to observe a sabbath to the Lord, so too, the land must observe a sabbath to the Lord. The land, like the animals, like people of all kinds are addressed the very same way. Each has their own relationship with God and each is called to observe a sabbath before God. The land is not just passive and inert matter. The land is alive and has her own relationship to God. Humans can help facilitate and support the relationship of the land with God or humans can undermine and sabotage that relationship. If being a person before God means we are each called into a relationship with God, and that such a relationship is cultivated as we observe the commandment to sabbath, this applies equally to all life and to the earth as well. All life is commanded and called to observe the sabbath for itself because all life is treated as persons before God. Wow! Isn't this fascinating?!

So then, as human beings, how are we called to repent? We are not only called to repent of the ways we ourselves may fail to observe the sabbath. We are also called to repent of the ways we obstruct other persons from observing a sabbath rest before God. Whether such persons are human persons, creatures of any kind

or the earth and the air and all that is alive, we must repent at how we are using and abusing the life around us because of our craving and greed and a never-having-enough consumption.

According to the biblical worldview, our abuse of the earth is not just a sin that is self-destructive. No. We as human beings and the choices we make in our lifestyles are guilty of preventing other persons from observing their sabbath obligation before God. The earth must be free to choose to fulfill her sabbath rest of worship and fellowship with God. How may the forests and the oceans, the air and the trees and the soil worship God when they are given the space and freedom to do so? How may we stop using and abusing humans, animals and the earth by overworking them to death?

May God transform our thinking and living as we take some time and space this Christmas to observe sabbath... Amen.