

Sermon Text 7/30

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“Call the Sabbath a Delight”

I’m going to start this sermon by making a confession. When reviewing possible scripture about the Sabbath for this service, I thought I was so smart. I saw the verses in Isaiah that Barbara just read for us and thought, bingo! These people have been hearing about the sabbath for weeks now and I’ve been following along online from Princeton, too. Verses from Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Ecclesiastes about how important the sabbath is, how it is a command by God, how to and how not to follow it, how hard that is to do in this day and age. And I’m going to come in here and tell them that actually, Isaiah says that the sabbath is a delight! It’s an easier than expected, not intimidating or overwhelming, carefree delight. They’re going love it.

It turns out that the sabbath *is* a delight, but not in the way that I was hoping. As is often the case, cherry picking scripture out of context is a surefire way to challenge assumptions and to push our understanding of God, or in this case, to write a more difficult sermon. But it’s also the case that God calls us to these verses for a reason. So this morning we will explore together why calling the sabbath a delight is not a get out of the law free card, but rather why calling the sabbath a delight leads to a deeper relationship with God, with an assist from an unlikely source.

In order to understand what Isaiah meant by calling the sabbath a delight, it is helpful to first understand a bit about Isaiah--or rather, the Isaiahs. The book of Isaiah is a composite work of several different prophets who lived throughout various periods in the history of Israel. There is first Isaiah, who lived *before* the Babylonian exile and is the one who gives us those very familiar Christmas eve verses about a child being born to us, the wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of peace. Second Isaiah wrote *during* the Babylonian exile and consoles and encourages the people of Israel by telling them not to remember the former things or consider the things of old, but to behold the new thing that God is about to do--a favorite refrain of any church committee about to introduce a new pastor, a new program, or a new color of the pew cushions to a congregation. Our verses for today come from third Isaiah, or

Trito-Isaiah. Third Isaiah wrote *after* the exile and return to Judah to an audience that was struggling with what it meant to live as God's people in this new time--it wasn't exactly the peaceful kingdom that the first two Isaiahs had promised. The people faced harsh conditions and economic oppression. They dealt with these hardships in exactly the wrong way--by turning once again to pagan rituals. Third Isaiah is frustrated, exhausted, and a bit angry with the people. But, he's also still faithfully optimistic that God's steadfastness will overcome the people's self-interest. This is where we find ourselves in chapter 58.

Here, Isaiah wants to clear up a few things about proper worship, including the sabbath. Right before our verses pick up, he's got some pretty sarcastic admonitions for the people about how they're worshipping only *for* show and *with* expectations of God in return. This is not true worship and not the way that God wants to be in relationship to us. And now Isaiah will tell us, this is not sabbath either. We're not meant to practice the sabbath for *our* own good--to make us look good or feel good. Sabbath is not simply resting or tuning out the world. It is not a "break" or downtime. We call that vacation. And bragging about how much you sabbath or how good you are at is isn't what God desires, either. Instead, sabbath is making a choice *from* and a choice *for*. It's a choice to live a certain way in relationship with God. Isaiah explains this in a series of if-then statements. If you do x, then y. Eugene Peterson's modern translation of the Bible called the Message is particularly helpful in understanding what Isaiah is getting at here. This is how he translates verses 9 through 12--think again of the verses that Barbara read for us and hear *this* version:

If you get rid of unfair practices,
 quit blaming victims,
 quit gossiping about other people's sins,
If you are generous with the hungry
 and start giving yourselves to the down-and-out,
Your lives will begin to glow in the darkness,
 your shadowed lives will be bathed in sunlight.
I will always show you where to go.
 I'll give you a full life in the emptiest of places.

So essentially, if you quit blaming, quit gossiping. If you are generous, give yourself to others. *Then*, life will be full. The translation goes on with verse 13,

If you watch your step on the Sabbath
and don't use my holy day for personal advantage,
If you treat the Sabbath as a day of joy,
God's holy day as a celebration,
If you honor it by refusing 'business as usual,'
making money, running here and there—
Then you'll be free to enjoy God!

In other words, *if* we can stop making the sabbath about ourselves, *then* we might truly experience it as God intends. God does intend for us to enjoy the sabbath, but the sabbath is intended for God. We don't get to define "delight" here, try as we might. Peterson offers it as "a day of joy" in his translation. What *is* delight, as these verses call us to frame the sabbath around? The people of Israel in the time of Third Isaiah thought they were practicing the sabbath, but they were missing the point. They never got past the if's...Maybe *we* are missing something too?

It's now that we turn to an unlikely source in helping us understand the sabbath as a delight. Sometimes, we can find revelation in unexpected places, even in art gallery. I want to preface what we're about to talk about with this--you don't have to like art; in fact, you can actively *dislike* art. You don't have to "get" art either. All I ask is that you keep an open mind and don't fall asleep during this part.

If we played word association game and I said "Monet" I bet most if not all of you would know who I was talking about, and I bet most if not all of you would have a particular image in your head when I said that name. Chances are that you're thinking of some iteration of Monet's most famous series of works, the water lilies. If you've ever been in a dentist's office waiting room, you know what I'm talking about. Monet worked on the theme of water lilies for three decades

of his life, from the 1890's up until his death in 1926. These paintings were inspired by his garden at his Giverny in Normandy, France and today you can visit his house and garden there.. If you're trying to remember where you might have seen a water lilies painting before and are coming up with multiple options, they're probably all right. Monet painted over 300 works in this series, so there's not just one iconic water lilies painting.

There are two main types of water lilies paintings. The first group depicts scenes from the edge of Monet's pond and the dense vegetation and the features found there. Think of the painting of the famous green Japanese bridge that is such a familiar image. This is part of that first group. The other group of paintings is in contrast--it plays on emptiness and includes only the surface of the water and reflections, opening up space rather than defining it. It is a work from this second group that we're going to consider alongside the sabbath as a delight.

The day after the armistice of WWI was signed on November 11, 1918, Monet gave the French people a gift to commemorate the event and to celebrate peace. He donated eight very large panels of water lilies that were to be housed in a small building in the Tuileries Garden in Paris called the Orangerie, originally built by Napoleon to store the garden's citrus trees. The building was renovated to accommodate Monet's large scale works and two rooms were created to house them--two elliptical-shaped rooms that together form the mathematical symbol for infinity. Each room contains four extremely large, curved panels that completely envelop the viewer. Between all of the paintings, there are 328 linear feet of water lilies surrounding you.

IMAGE ON SCREEN

One of these works is *Les Nuages*, which you have on your handout. Take a look. Again, I'm not asking you to like art or to get it. This may just look like a bunch of blurry smudges to you, and that's ok. In fact, a study was done that asked if the Impressionists, like Monet, were actually just far-sighted and couldn't see what was right in front of them, hence the blurry paintings.

Scientists used medical records and French census data to determine that this theory was false, but nevertheless, you're not wrong if the adjective you would use to describe this image is "fuzzy." Spend a few moments looking at the image. Where does your eye go? What do you

notice? What's present, and what's missing? There is no clear horizon or even top or bottom, no landmarks or people to help orient us. You could maybe turn it the other way around and it would look just the same. *Les Nuages* translates to "clouds" in English and I'll admit that it wasn't until I looked up that translation that I realized that the white matter in the middle of the painting was a reflection of something, of clouds. This work puts us in a different mood, it pulls us into a new atmosphere, one that is more peaceful and perhaps a little disorienting.

Monet says that he wanted to create "the illusion of an endless whole, of a wave with no horizon and no shore." Close your eyes and imagine being in one of the rooms at the Orangerie where this painting hangs, completely surrounded by these water lilies. The illusion of an endless whole, a wave with no horizon and no shore.

IMAGE OFF SCREEN

I was traveling earlier this summer for my PhD and ended up with a free morning in Paris (how sad for me). You can guess how I filled it. I made my way to the Orangerie when it first opened so that I could try to see Monet's works without the rooms being too crowded. Once I spent some time walking around the first room and viewing these paintings, I sat on one of the benches in the middle of room, on the end that was near the entrance to the gallery. I found myself not looking at the paintings anymore, but rather looking at people as they came into the room--more specifically, looking at the expressions on their faces. It was just as interesting as the paintings themselves. The expressions that I observed were as follows--awe, wonder, shock, disorientation, amazement, and, fittingly, delight. Jaws dropped and people began to smile. One thing they didn't start to do is talk. This was because of the rather direct and plainly put, rather French security guard in the room that quickly nixed any conversation that started to rise up. There was a large sign in the room that read "No talking" and they meant it. This really look people off guard--including me, but it also created something different--a different time, a different space, a different atmosphere. The room, and everybody in it, was entirely reverent. We were in a different state of mind. Remember how Monet said with *Les Nuages* that he wanted to create "the illusion of an endless whole, a wave with no horizon and no shore." This is true about the paintings themselves, but it is also true about the experience of viewing them. It is immersive, eternal, different, and whole.

This is how I think Isaiah is calling us to treat the sabbath. To him, delight is not simply a nice word or thought, but it is a calling from God. This means that sabbath is not putting our phones on airplane mode to disconnect. Sabbath is not taking a nap on a Sunday afternoon because it's been a long week. Sabbath is not an action. Sabbath is a state of mind that leads to delight. It is a state of mind that will reveal the child that was born for us, the wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of peace. It is a state of mind that ushers in the new thing that God does through the grace of Jesus Christ, day after day. Sabbath as a delight is a *different* atmosphere. It's the sort of no talking, mean French guard, reverent astonishment and awe atmosphere. It's "the illusion of an endless whole atmosphere", to borrow Monet's phrase. When we can follow through on all of Isaiah's ifs--if you stop pointing fingers, if you stop speaking evil, if you stop trampling on the sabbath, if you stop making the sabbath about yourself--*then* you can enter into this state of mind and truly call the sabbath a delight.

This state of mind, of delight, of sabbath does require something of us. Like the water lilies, it requires us to notice, to keep our eyes open, and to keep our mouths shut. It requires us to open up space. It requires us to walk into the room and be present. When we do this, then the sabbath becomes a meeting place between us and God. When we delight in sabbath, we are saying, "Here I am God." And when we truly delight in sabbath, we can hear God respond, "I've been waiting for you." When we delight in sabbath, God delights in us.

So go ahead, call the sabbath a delight. It tells God that God is important to you and that what God desires, is what you desire. I'm not suggesting you have to go to Paris and the Orangerie to do this, but I encourage you to consider how you can open up space and find moments to connect with God in a different state of mind--an immersive, eternal, different, and whole state of mind. If you do this, then you may find that it will help you paint the picture of a deep, meaningful, delightful life of faith.

Let us pray. God we so desire to do your will, but like the Israelites, we make it all about about us. Help us to remember Isaiah's call and to meet you in the endless whole of your love, grace, and sabbath. Amen.

