

Utterly Transformed

The Rev. Dr. Scott Ramsey
Psalm 124; Romans 12:1-8
Lewinsville Presbyterian Church
August 27, 2023

It is really good to be back. I cannot thank you enough for the gift of a sabbatical this summer. Laura and I, along with Ginny – and a little bit of Will – enjoyed unplugging from the rhythms and responsibilities of work, we got to spend time with each other, as well as with family and long-time friends – I was able to spend some time with my mother down in Davidson, North Carolina, in the memory unit of the retirement community where she lives – thanks to a grant from the Lilly Foundation, we were able to travel to some places, and to have some adventures, the memories of which we will treasure the rest of our lives, and I'm planning to find a time to share some of those highlights with you. While there aren't any really awesome stories – the mosquitoes in the Boundary Waters of Minnesota were as legendary as some of you had warned me about, seeing the statue of David in Florence, Italy, learning to make pasta in Siena, and visiting the Vatican Museum in Rome were all as astonishing as we had anticipated, and then, because life has a way of keeping our feet on the ground, my sabbatical concluded – I am not kidding you – with a root canal procedure last week. Sandy Albrecht and I had a really good laugh about that one.

I'm thankful to you the congregation, to the Session and the Personnel Committee, and in particular to Pastor Layne and Pastor Jen, John Nothaft, Allison Lineberger, Evan Ayars, and the rest of the staff, for the ways they stepped in to provide leadership, pastoral care, and overall ministry during the summer, and I'd like for all of us to express our appreciation to them with a round of applause.

While I was on sabbatical, you all were engaging in your own deep – and THOROUGH – reflections on the theme of sabbath with a 9-part sermon series on the sabbath. Pastor Layne and Pastor Jen dug deep into the Scriptures, and as Layne was telling me about it this past week, two things struck me. One was how there are *a lot* of connections with the sabbath in the Bible. But the second was that, for the most part, the texts that they were preaching were not really obscure texts. The theme of sabbath rest, and its connections with social justice, the creation, healing, and our overall well-being, has been right there in front of our noses all along. Part of my hope, and I suspect I'm not the only one, is that our reflections on sabbath will continue to deepen our congregational life and our missional witness in our community and world. Because it is very much the case that our world, in general, and this area in a particular way, is organized against the sabbath rest that God intends for us. Fast-paced systems are grinding the life out of people, including those of us who are the recipients of this faith tradition. Along with our Jewish neighbors, the church bears witness to a different way of living, where we do not earn our value, we do not produce our value, and we do not purchase our

value as human beings. Sabbath is a way of honoring our God-given value, by centering our lives on God.

Our texts today are not sabbath texts, per se. The word 'sabbath' does not appear in Psalm 124 or Romans 12. But these texts are filled with God, and with the conscious awareness of God, and ultimately, that is what the sabbath is for. Keeping the sabbath, practicing sabbath, is not about checking a box, it is not about keeping just one day holy. Keeping the sabbath is about orienting our overall awareness and attention to the presence of God. We do not practice sabbath to *recover* from the other days in the week. We practice sabbath in order that sabbath can shape the other days of the week, so that our work is done with the same kind of conscious awareness of God that we cultivate intentionally on the sabbath.

Psalm 124 and Romans 12 bear witness to the agency of God in shaping and forming us. "If it had been the Lord who was on our side," Psalm 124 begins, "let Israel now say – if it had not been the Lord who was on our side, when our enemies attacked us, then they would have swallowed us up alive, when their anger was kindled against us." Psalm 124 briefly entertains a hypothetical, two-party scenario in which it is just us and our "enemies." Who are these "enemies"? The psalmist may well have had flesh-and-blood enemies in mind, those who were bigger, scarier, more heavily resourced, better armed, than the psalmist. Ancient Israel was caught between a whole variety of ancient empires who sought to control and use the Jews for imperial prosperity. But Ephesians 6 teaches us that "our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the spiritual forces of evil," so we may also notice that there are other enemies, other forces that seek to distract us from living faithfully, things that want our heart's attention and allegiance, addictions that tell us we need to live in fear, rather than in faith. These are the kinds of things that we talk about with our therapists, or with our closest friends in the world, the kinds of things that wake us up in the middle of the night.

"If it had not been the Lord who was on our side," if we were on our own against these things, "we would have been swallowed up whole, a long time ago." The fact that we are here today, given the things that the people in this room have survived and endured, the fact that we are here today, and have not yet been swallowed up or consumed, is itself testimony to the presence of the Lord in our lives. Because that hypothetical, two-party scenario is not the way our lives really are. There is a 3rd party, a 3rd force, in our lives, who resets all of the calculations about how things will go, who levels out the ground where we thought we were overmatched by our past history, or by a family conflict, or by a tough time discerning what we've been put on the earth to do. God is with us, active in our lives, and our part is to receive, like Mother Mary, and host the action of God in our lives.

As the Centering Prayer movement teaches us, our work is simply to offer our "consent to God's presence and action within us." That's all. Offer "our consent to God's presence and action within us." As we are able to quiet the interior noise of our lives, and to notice, to observe, and to welcome God's presence and action within us, God comes into our lives and will rearrange our "interior furniture" so that our lives reflect God's purposes for us, rather than our own ego-driven agendas.

In Romans 12, Paul says, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God.” Paul first warns us against trying too hard to conform, to fit into, the surrounding culture – a warning which is urgent for us to keep front of our minds – and then he says to “be transformed.”

Notice the tense of that verb. Paul doesn’t say, “Transform yourselves,” which would be to do it ourselves. He says to “Be transformed,” by which he means to allow God’s Holy Spirit to renew our minds, allow God’s Spirit to do the work. This is the same point that our ancestors with the Protestant Reformation were making with the *semper reformanda* slogan of the Reformation, *the church reformed and always being reformed, according to the Word of God*. The church is to be reformed, by the Word and the Spirit of God, to invite the Spirit in, to make the necessary changes to the church. When we set out on our own to make reformation happen, we will inevitably resort to exerting our own will upon ourselves and others, which is to say, we will displace the agency of God with our own. Our attention will be centered on ourselves and our own agendas about what needs to happen, rather than on welcoming God’s energy and agenda into our lives.

It is really good to be back. And I am deeply excited about the ways that we will be carrying the restful energy of the sabbath into our ministry this year. I am deeply excited about the ways that we will be cultivating attentive awareness to the presence and action of God in our individual lives, in the life and mission of this congregation, and in the wider community. I am deeply excited about the ways that, as we engage in our mission and ministry this year – being blessed ourselves through our participation in the congregation and being a blessing to the community outside this congregation – we will bear the heart of God into the world.

To God, and to God alone, be all the glory, now and forever. Amen.