

First Presbyterian Church

Cheyenne, Wyoming

August 22, 2010

Rev. Bob Garrard

Worship Theme: Keeping the Sabbath Holy

Hebrews 12: 18-29, Luke 13:10-17

“Keeping the Sabbath Holy” has been an issue since the time of Moses, some 3500 years ago. I suspect most of us here have heard many sermons on the Sabbath. I think today’s scriptures give us some new pathways as well as reminders of some old ideas on “Keeping the Sabbath Holy.”

Speaking of pathways, today’s lessons remind me in part of Robert Frost’s Poem, “The Road Not Taken.” The poem begins: “Two roads diverged in a yellow wood And sorry I could not travel both. And be one traveler, long I stood. And looked down one as far as I could, To where it bent in the undergrowth;”.... And the poem ends: “I shall be telling this with a sigh. Somewhere ages and ages hence: Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—I took the one less traveled by, And that has made all the difference.”

Two roads or paths are also offered in today’s Bible lessons. Join me on this journey where we learn new ways, and recall the old on how to keep the Sabbath holy. Let us begin with Hebrews and then blend in what Jesus said and did in Luke.

The Presbyterian scholar, Dr. Thomas Long, from whom I gleaned most of this sermon tells us: The persecuted and confused congregation in Hebrews is being presented the two roads options by the writer we will call “The Preacher.” However, these Christians “are not in a yellow wood—they are in a heat-baked and exhausting spiritual desert—but they have come to a place where two roads diverge, and like the traveler in Frost’s poem, the one they choose to take will make ‘all the difference.’”

“The signpost that points down one fork reads: ‘To Mount Sinai,’ and the sign pointing down the other fork reads ‘To Mount Zion.’ Mount Sinai and Mount Zion are metaphors for the old and the new covenants” God has made with us, “and the Preacher has been laboring throughout the whole sermon to get us to go to Mount Zion. He is fearful, though, that we will choose the other path. The road to Mount Sinai is well-traveled, downhill most of the way, has plenty of fast food restaurants, and looks more comfortable than the rocky and narrow high road that climbs up to Mount Zion.”

“In order to urge his congregation” and us “to choose the high road, to travel to Mount Zion,” the Preacher uses a classic comparison” of the options pitch. First of all he presents the road to Mt. Sinai. “In the Old Testament, Sinai is, of course, a good thing”—the place of the burning bush and the giving of the law to Moses. “But the Preacher employs Sinai as a negative sign, a symbol of everything that goes awry in religion when it is severed from the high-priestly ministry of Christ.”

“What is wrong with Sinai? It is a place of fear. Human beings come to Sinai as perpetually unclean sinners, and therefore the holiness of God at Sinai is a holy terror.” To even touch Sinai is fatal. “Sinai is filled with sights and sounds that inject horror into the heart. Even though a fire blazes there, it is still a place of gloom and darkness. Streaks of jagged lightning split the sky, thunder rumbles, and a trumpet blows so

loudly it scares the wits out of people, but the trumpet and the storm are mild compared to the stark terror of God's voice. In Exodus, the people beg Moses not to let God speak directly to them because, as they say, 'We will die'. Even Moses shook with fear on Sinai." [Interpretation: Teaching and Preaching-Hebrews](#), pages 136-141.

This same fearful and awful negative presence of Mt. Sinai can be heard in the words of the Leader of the synagogue in Luke. He is indignant because Jesus had cured a woman, who had been crippled over for 18 years –on the Sabbath! The leader angrily declares, "How dare you heal on the Sabbath, Jesus! There are six days in which people may come to be healed, but not on the Sabbath!" "The leader's concern is for the Sabbath law, and he shows only indignation that the woman has been released from her condition. He construes his role as maintaining proper observance of the Sabbath rather than celebrating the release of the woman from her 'weakness.'" This is religion gone awry. The Leader might have also been mad at Jesus for approaching a woman in public in the first place which was forbidden. But Jesus had done more than enough "legal damage" with the healing. The punishing, fearful and awful negative presence of Mt. Sinai arose that Sabbath Day when the crippled woman was healed. This is an example of the road to Mt. Sinai. [TNIBC Vol. IX](#), pg. 274

"But the good news," as we return to the Preacher in Hebrews, "is that we are not at Sinai;" instead, he leads them and us to the road that approaches Mount Zion. "'Approach' is one of the Preacher's favorite words to refer to the bold and confident access to God possible in Christ: "Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness"; "[Christ] is able for all time to save those who approach God through him"; "let us approach [the house of God] with a true heart in full assurance of faith." These approaches are also ways of "keeping the Sabbath Holy." [Interpretation: -Hebrews](#), pages 136-141.

When we approach Mount Zion, what do we find? The Preacher describes this destination using four pairs of terms. We find: "1. The Mountain and the City. The time of King David's reign was remembered as Israel's Camelot. Jerusalem and Mount Zion were more than places then, they were symbols of ideals in government and worship, prosperity and peace. But now, under the new covenant, they refer to more than the reign of David and the earthly city; they speak of the rule of God and the heavenly Jerusalem. No one cries out in fear on Zion's hill, as they did at Sinai, terrified that God's word and presence bring death;" instead, Mt Zion "is the city of the living God." [Interpretation: Teaching and Preaching-Hebrews](#), pages 136-141.

The healing of the woman crippled for 18 years was an early demonstration of Mount Zion as the city of the living God, and Jesus' way of "Keeping the Sabbath Holy." "The woman's condition may have been seen as indicative of her diminished status as a woman; her condition was attributed to 'a spirit of weakness,' that left her bent over and unable to stand straight. Jesus addresses her and answers the leader of the synagogue by contrasting what one would do for an animal with what he has done for the woman. In the end, Jesus confers on the woman a status of dignity: She is a 'daughter of Abraham'. This scene points to a new status for women in the kingdom of God as Jesus released the woman from her ailment by a pronouncement and the laying on of hands. The physical act again suggests a further significance. Jesus laid hands on the sick, but the laying on of hands was also used as a conferral of blessing. The proof of the woman's restoration is immediate. She is able to stand straight, and

she praises God—the only proper response to God’s redemptive power.” Such is the spirit of the road to Mt Zion, the City of the living God. [TNIBC Vol. IX, pg. 274](#)

Also in the approach to Mt Zion we find: 2. “The Angels and the Firstborn. The citizens of this heavenly city are the angels, not just a few of them, but thousands upon thousands, and not the dour and pious messengers of countless paintings and movies but frolicking, laughing, festive angels. None of the gloom of old Sinai can be found here. Along with angels are gathered ‘the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven.’ This is the Preacher’s way of talking about Christians who have gone to their reward, the baptized saints of God who, through baptism, belong to Jesus Christ, the true ‘firstborn’, who are ‘enrolled’ in the Book of Life.” [Interpretation: Hebrews, pages 136-141.](#)

We further find: 3. “The Judge and the Acquitted. In the courts of Zion there is but one verdict: not guilty. Those who have come to this city have passed through the gateway of the great high priest, Jesus, who has ‘perfected for all time those who are sanctified.’ Down at Sinai, the laws are tough and the judgments are harsh. No human being can stand under them, and everyone has to do some time. But here in Zion, the God who sent the Son is the judge, and the Son, who ‘for a little while was made lower than the angels,’ has already done the time on our behalf.” [Interpretation: Hebrews, pages 136-141.](#)

We then find: 4. “Jesus and the Sprinkled Blood. There is blood on Sinai, and there is blood on Mount Zion, but it isn’t the same blood. On Sinai there is the blood of violence, tragedy, and perpetual sin. There is blood that cries out for revenge. There is the endless flow of the blood sacrifices that ‘cannot perfect the conscience of the worshiper’. On Mount Zion, by contrast, there is the ‘sprinkled blood’ of Jesus offered ‘once for all’, blood that purifies the ‘conscience from dead works to worship the living God.’ By his blood, Jesus has become the mediator of a new covenant, a covenant of forgiveness,” a covenant of healing, “a covenant in which ‘those who are called . . . receive the promised eternal inheritance.’” [Interpretation: Teaching and Preaching-Hebrews, pages 136-141.](#)

“There is also worship,” “Keeping the Sabbath Holy” “every day, all day, in the true sanctuary on Mount Zion, but leave the guilty consciences behind. No daily sacrifices are required; the one, perfect sacrifice has already been made. Down at Sinai, the blood of Abel spilled there speaks a word of unfulfilled justice, but the only blood words spoken on Zion are these: ‘This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.’” [Interpretation: Teaching and Preaching-Hebrews, pages 136-141.](#)

“Given the pictures of Sinai and Zion that the Preacher painted in the congregation’s imagination, the travel decision is made. They are ready to order the tickets. Who would dare venture down the road to Sinai, a place of fire and noise, dire warnings and the shaking of the earth, when the other road leads to Zion, a place where there is singing in the streets and innumerable angels decked out like they are going to a fiesta? ” [Interpretation: Teaching and Preaching-Hebrews, pages 136-141.](#)

“But not so fast. The Preacher has a surprise left in his travelogue. He takes us back to Zion for a second look, and guess what? Mount Zion is also a place of fire and noise, stern warnings and the earth shaking. What is the Preacher saying? Is Mount Zion just Sinai with a little gingerbread—same old judgment, same old fear?”

“No, Zion and Sinai are an eternity apart; one is the mountain of the new covenant and the other the old. It is true that, like Sinai, Zion has fire and shaking, but under the

new covenant these experiences are transformed. Under the old order, fires and earthquakes are destroyers, burning up everything in their paths and shaking down all once-stable structures. Under the new covenant, though, God shakes heaven and earth like an antique collector shakes the dust off an old marble statue: to get rid of everything that hides and defaces the beauty that was intended by the sculptor. In Zion, God shakes not to destroy but to preserve, 'so that what cannot be shaken may remain.' In Zion, God is a consuming fire: not a wildfire burning out of control, but a refiner's fire, purifying and preserving the righteous, the fire that at the end of the age burns up 'all causes of sin and evildoers.'" Interpretation: Teaching and Preaching-Hebrews, pages 136-141.

"One important theological insight from this is that, for the Preacher, we do not have two Gods, one shrouded in smoke on Sinai, the other running around Zion like a dotty old man, twisting his watch fob and merrily handing out candy to children. The God of Sinai and the God of Zion are one and the same, holy and awe-full, a purifying fire of perfect judgment," who sent his Son to be the perfect sacrifice to cleanse and save us." Interpretation: Teaching and Preaching-Hebrews, pages 136-141.

"So the real question on this journey is not, 'Where do you want to go today?' The real question is, 'With whom will you travel?' On the path marked 'Sinai,' you travel on your own, and if you go to the mountain by yourself, on your own strength, you will not escape the judgment. But if we heed the voice speaking to us, the voice that 'in these last days . . . has spoken to us by a Son,' then we will follow Christ into the heavenly tabernacle and 'offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe.'"

All you have heard today involves not only new and old pathways to "Keeping the Sabbath Holy," but making every day holy by traveling with the Lord Jesus Christ, and living life that way he lived it—to the glory of God and without fear. All aboard for Zion!