

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People

Proper 4 – Year B

RCL Readings¹ – Deuteronomy 5:12-15; Psalm 81:1-10; II Corinthians 4:5-12; Mark 2:23-3:6

ACNA Readings – Deuteronomy 5:6-21; Psalm 81:1-10 (11-16); II Corinthians 4:1-12; Mark 2:23-28

Seasonal Introduction. In the Christian calendar the season after Pentecost is known as Ordinary Time, beginning the day after Pentecost and ending the day before Advent. Depending on the date of Easter the season is between 23 and 28 weeks. The first Sunday is always Trinity Sunday and the last Sunday is always the Reign of Christ or Christ the King Sunday. The term 'ordinary time' refers to the progressive counting of Sundays following Pentecost by ordinal numbers: 2nd, 3rd, 4th, etc. During Ordinary Time the lectionary takes us through one of the Gospels—this year it is the gospel of Mark.

Common Theme. The command to remember and observe the Sabbath is central to our readings this week. Some of the issues around the Sabbath may be how we can practically implement God's gift in our modern (often Gentilic) context. What is clear is that the Sabbath is a great gift of God and should remind us weekly of God's holiness, faithfulness, and even Lordship.

Hebraic Context. The Scriptures record the LORD giving the 10 Commandments on Mt Sinai twice, once in Exodus 20 and then again in Deuteronomy 5. In Exodus 20:1 the 10 Commandments begins with **וַיְדַבֵּר אֱלֹהִים אֶת כָּל־הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה לְאָמֹר** "And God spoke all these words, saying" while Deuteronomy 5:5 simply starts with **לֵאמֹר** "Saying".² The Jewish sages infer that God is doing the talking and verbally declaring the Torah. The issue then is this: if God is doing the talking, how do we explain the differences between what's recorded in Exodus and what's in Deuteronomy?

Concerning the 4th Commandment, the Sabbath,³ in Exodus the instruction is to remember the Sabbath.⁴ The reason for remembering the Sabbath in Exodus is because of Creation "For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy." In Deuteronomy the command is changed to observe the Sabbath and the reason given is to remember the exodus from Egypt. "Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the Lord

¹ Alternate RCL readings: I Samuel 3:1-10, (11-20); Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18

² The KJV, ASV, and YLT translate **לֵאמֹר** literally as "saying" while the newer translations, including the NKJV and NASB, look towards Deuteronomy 5:4 as the antecedent, "He (the LORD) said" rather than leaving an open interpretation of whether Moses or God was the speaker.

³ The 3rd commandment in Augustinian traditions, such as the Roman Catholic Church.

⁴ The command to remember is the most common command in the Hebrew Scriptures. The Sabbath was the first thing created that was called holy by the Lord. The Sages noted that it was also the first thing the world forgot. The Sabbath appears in Genesis 2 and doesn't reappear again until the Exodus from Egypt.

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your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the Lord your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day.”

Concerning the 4th Commandment then, one version says to remember and the other to observe, and the reason for the commandments differs. A skeptic may ask: so which one did God say? Neither Moses (who, presumably, heard the very words of God and saw them written down), the Jewish scribes through the centuries, nor the Jewish sages were challenged theologically by the variant readings—instead they delighted in them and proclaim: there are two reasons for the Sabbath. There are so many reasons to give thanks to God. Today, both the remembrance of creation and the remembrance of slavery and deliverance are included in the Sabbath prayers on Friday night.

Deuteronomy 5:12-15.⁵ At the beginning of chapter 5 Moses called the assembly of Israel together.⁶ He proceeded to retell the laws and judgements of God, beginning with the 10 Commandments. The people of Israel had already received the Commandments from Mt Sinai, as recorded in Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers.⁷ Yet those people had since died in the wilderness and the new generation needed to remember for themselves the *Torah* of God.

As Israel was going into a new land with new leaders, Moses felt compelled to teach the law once more to the people.⁸ Repetition brings to remembrance and remembrance was to lead to obedience, which is why parents were to constantly teach their children and kings were to write the law out in their own book. The people were to learn the commandments, it was to be imprinted on their hearts. But the best way to learn something is to practice it. Practice is also the best way to teach. Later, Jesus commanded His disciples to go make disciples and to teach them to obey (hopefully just as we are His disciples and obey).

⁵ ACNA includes Deuteronomy 5:6-21

⁶ Moses most likely addressed the elders, tribal leaders, and representative heads of each of the communities, along with any who were in hearing distance—this isn't against a literal definition of “all Israel”.

⁷ Leviticus 27:34 states, “These are the commandments that the LORD commanded Moses for the people of Israel on Mount Sinai.” This is the final verse of Leviticus. While the 10 commandments (דברים, words) were given on Mount Sinai, the many other charges, commandments, statutes, and laws were also given directly by God for the people of Israel.

⁸ The name of Moses' fifth book, Deuteronomy, comes from the latin translation of Deuteronomy 17:18. “He [the king] shall write for himself in a book a copy of this law.” Deuteronomy was a reiteration of the guidance of God (both in History and commandments). The Hebrew name for Deuteronomy is דברים (words), a reference to Deuteronomy 1:1, “These are the words that Moses spoke.” Also, what we call the “10 commandments” in English is called the “10 words” in Hebrew as Exodus 20:1 states.

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While reminding Israel of God's commandments, Moses used a common Hebraic figure of speech throughout Deuteronomy.⁹ He declared that the Covenant made at Horeb (Sinai) was actually not made with their forebears but with the people alive today. What Moses stated was literally and blatantly inaccurate. The generation that stood at Horeb was the generation that died in the wilderness and were, quite literally, the parents of those Moses talked to before they entered the land of Israel.¹⁰ Moses knew that, as did the people he was talking to, but Moses invited this generation of Israel (and, by virtue of this rhetorical expression, each successive generation) to become part of God's story—they could share in the experience of Mount Sinai and the Covenant. God's voice was for them, in whatever time they heard. God spoke face to face with this new generation with Moses still acting as the intermediary.¹¹

Within the 10 commandments is the command to observe (or remember) the Sabbath day. In Deuteronomy, Moses made the day more personal to those who heard him. The most substantial difference between the Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5 is that the reason for the Sabbath observance becomes the Exodus from Egypt rather than a memorial of Creation as it is in Exodus 20. The Sabbath took on a redemptive character as well as being holy. Engagement in and with holy time is a practice that reminds the believer of God's holiness and redemption. It allows a people removed in space and time to personally participate in redemptive history, something many Jewish people continue to do every week on *Shabbat*.

Psalm 81:1-10.¹² Psalm 81 is a psalm of Asaph and often connected with the celebration of joyful festivals like Sukkot and the day of trumpets.¹³ To inspire the worshipper, the psalmist reflected on the exodus from Egypt, the greatest act of redemption in Israel's history. According to Israel's sacred history, the redemption from Egypt led them to Mount Sinai and the giving of the Torah.

⁹ Or, more likely, it became a common Hebraic literary device because of Deuteronomy.

¹⁰ If Moses was talking to the elders and representative heads of the tribes, clans, and communities, it is likely that many of them would have been present at Mount Sinai as children, however, the covenant God made there with Israel would still have also been with their forefathers.

¹¹ We also know that Israel was afraid to meet God and no man has seen God face to face—they were so afraid they didn't even want to hear His voice. But the writer did not see an issue with Moses declaring that God had spoken to them face to face at Horeb. Moses became the mediator for Israel. Later, by the 2nd Temple Period, Angels were also known to be mediators between God and man (Zechariah, Daniel, II Maccabees, Tobit, and the New Testament such as Acts 7:30-42).

¹² ACNA includes Psalm 81:1-16

¹³ The opening verses encourage the worshipper to take part in the exhortation of God through singing, playing instruments and using trumpets at the appropriate time. Leviticus 23:24 states, "In the seventh month, on the first day of the month (the new moon) you shall observe a solemn rest, a memorial proclaimed with blast of trumpets..."

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Asaph wrote of God's redemption of Israel "in your distress you called and I rescued you." Asaph was the director of music in the time of King David, hundreds of years after the Exodus.¹⁴ However, if God heard the groanings of Israel in the past and brought them forth with signs and wonders, surely God will hear those who cry out to Him in the present. The Hebrews who were gathered at Mount Sinai heard the voice of the Lord and were tasked with obedience. The psalmist now admonished the worshipper to hear the Lord's voice. Within the sacred history of God's redemption is the great tragedy of the exodus—those that departed Egypt never entered the Promised Land, for they refused to hear the word of the Lord.

The psalm concludes, "But you would be fed with the finest of wheat; with honey from the rock I would satisfy you." What does it mean to draw honey from a rock? Surely this must be hyperbole. Asaph spoke of the reward of listening to God, but if it was simply that sweet things come when we listen, why not simply say, "With honey, I would satisfy you?" Why is the rock the source of the honey?

There are several ways to understand this verse. One is that the psalmist was referring to the rock that served as the "well of Miriam" while the Israelites were in the desert. According to Jewish tradition, it rolled along with the people as they traveled and, when they stopped, sweet water gushed from it, satisfying their thirst.¹⁵ The concept of the rock that followed Israel in the desert is also used by Paul in 1 Corinthians 10.

Deuteronomy 8 specifically mentions grain and honey as being rewards for carefully observing the commands of God. Where Israel once was fed manna every day and could drink their fill of water "out of the flinty rock" (possibly from the well of Miriam), and yet did not obey God—for they would not submit in their stubborn hearts—Israel was encouraged to remember and obey and God would provide for all their needs.

Perhaps another explanation is Asaph was actually using hyperbole. God does provide for us even in the most unlikely situations. Many enemies might come against us and we have burdens we have to carry but God can provide even there. God brought Israel out of Egypt and they had to do nothing while He provided for them—although He did ask that they hear Him, worship Him alone, and follow His ways.

II Corinthians 4:5-12.¹⁶ Chapter 4 begins with the Greek preposition *διὰ* often translated as 'because', or 'therefore' and connects us to Paul's previous discussion in Chapter 3. There he

¹⁴ Asaph was a levite who stood opposite of Heman and sang before the temple (I Chronicles 6:31-39). The sons of Asaph continued to serve as worship leaders before God (II Chronicles 20:13-23).

¹⁵ Taanit 9a.9; Bamidbar Rabbah 1.2

¹⁶ ACNA includes II Corinthians 4:1-12

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described the Corinthian community as “an epistle of Christ” and how every one of the community were involved as “ministers of a new covenant”.

Throughout the epistle Paul makes a lot of use of the word ‘we’. The gospel is not the sole purview of apostolic succession, it is the lifeblood of the whole community. Everyone takes part in the blessing of redemption, having received grace, mercy, and the work of redemption and now living and sharing His grace and mercy. Paul encouraged the Corinthians not to lose heart in both living and proclaiming the truth of the good news. Everyone has this ministry, not only the apostles or church leadership.

How is this possible? Paul returns to the first event in history, the creation. God, who was powerful enough to create light by His voice, is also powerful enough to show His light, His surpassing power, in and through us.¹⁷ We are all engaged in the proclamation of the truth through living the gospel in the sight of others and plainly speaking the truth as teachers, preachers, and evangelists. Paul acknowledged that the surrounding culture does not always respond positively to the Christian faith. There are several reasons for that, but Paul highlights one here. There is something sinister at work, “the god of this age”, who has blinded the minds of unbelievers.¹⁸

One of the paradoxes of the Judaeo Christian faith is that the message of the eternal truth of the Lord is guarded and proclaimed by mere humans. Paul described it as treasures in jars of clay. This is not to devalue the human body. Life is a gift, our bodies are fashioned by the Lord and

¹⁷ “Let light shine out of darkness.” This is obviously a reference to Genesis 1:3-5, but it also may reference a Jewish thought of the 1st century. In Genesis Rabbah 11.2, Rabbi Levi stated that God gave light to Adam that first night when darkness fell over all the earth and Adam was terrified. This thought comes from Psalm 139:11-12, thought to be first spoken by Adam and later written by David. God acted by giving light to those in darkness and those who were in need. In return, according to Jewish tradition, one of the questions we will be asked after we pass to the next world is, “Did you turn darkness into light?” Or, did we show the light God gave us to reveal His life in our mortal bodies? Surely as God showed us grace, it is our mission (and privilege) to set forth the truth plainly to those who are blind and in darkness.

¹⁸ The title “god of this age” is not used anywhere else in Scripture. However, throughout history, many religions have believed in two opposing and, practically speaking, equal forces—good, often seen as light or spirit, and evil, portrayed as either darkness or material. Whether Zoroastrianism or Manichaeism, these beliefs also came into both Jewish and Christian dialogues (such as the Nag Hammadi *Gnostic Gospels* or *The Book of Giants*, found among the Dead Sea Scrolls), and theologians (such as Marcion). In later writings, opposing Manichaeism doctrine, the term “god of this age” continued to be used as a term for Satan.

However, while Satan may be able to blind the world and we may be persecuted, the opposing force is not like Satan at all. For God could simply declare, “Let light shine out of darkness” and His life is at work in us.

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we are loved by God. Rather, Paul is comparing the value of the gospel, which is an incalculable treasure, to the value of mortal flesh. We are so clearly weak, experiencing persecution and opposition from the god of this age and those who follow him. And yet God's life is revealed even in our mortal body. And when we die we know that the same God who created light, the same God who raised Jesus physically from the dead, will also raise us up as well.

And yes, both Jesus, and now Paul, forewarned His disciples that they would suffer because of their faith in Him. Jesus underwent trials and hardships and Paul understood that the 'life of Christ', including His suffering and dying, was being lived out in him and in the Corinthians believers. The paradox of faith is that we share in the glorious living redemptive kingdom life of Jesus as well the sufferings, persecution and death of the messiah. Paul concludes that "death is working in us, but (also) life in you."

Hebraic Perspective. During the late 2nd Temple period, around a generation prior to Jesus, two rival schools of Jewish thought developed. They were named after their founding sages Hillel and Shammai.¹⁹ These two schools of Jewish thought debated vigorously and disagreed about almost everything on all issues of ritual observance, morality, ethics and aspects of theology. Their influence is still felt in modern Judaism to this day.

Concerning the debate on the prohibition of working on the Sabbath one of the questions raised was: Can you heal on the Sabbath? And if so, how? The sage Hillel taught that healing could be performed on the Sabbath as long as the healing was brought about only by a word and not an action. Shammai, being the stricter sage on almost every issue, argued that no healing of any sort should be performed and you should wait for Sunday before applying medical help.

This debate continued long after Jesus with the conclusion that Judaism has advocated all but three commandments may be broken to save a life.²⁰ Life is the pinnacle of creation and everything should be done to preserve life. Thus, in modern Israel, it is permissible to work on the Sabbath if you are a medical professional, serve in the emergency services like an ambulance or the police forces, or guard the border in the army.²¹

¹⁹ Hillel and Shammai are not called rabbis as the rabbinical movement was still in its infancy during this point of history. Jesus is the only person given the title of rabbi in the New Testament. The first person recorded as a rabbi in Jewish literature is Rabbi Gamaliel.

²⁰ Even to save a life, it is forbidden to: worship foreign gods; commit adultery (or any other forbidden sexual acts, such as homosexuality, incest, or zoophilia); or murder.

²¹ Today, when religious observant Jews are sent overseas as first responders in natural disasters they wear T-Shirts that declare: "Today I break the Sabbath to save a life." In fact, Rambam, in his commentary on *Mishnah Shabbat* 18:3 stated that it was best if a known observer of Torah were the one to break the Sabbath prohibitions to save a life, as it would show just how important saving a life is.

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At the beginning of Jesus' ministry He operated within the boundaries of the teachings of Hillel concerning healing on the Sabbath. In Luke 4:31-37 He rebuked an evil spirit with words and cured a possessed man, and subsequently rebuked the fever of Peter's mother-in-law and healed her. In our Gospel reading from Mark 3, Jesus used words to enact the healing, well within the boundaries of the current debate on Sabbath healing. Later, however, in John 9:1-12 Jesus kneaded clay and applied the mud to the ears of a man born blind to enact the cure. Kneading was one of the actions forbidden on the Sabbath and was defined as work and healing a man born blind was not considered immediately life-saving. In this later instance we see Jesus crossing the boundaries of the debate to show that life is more important than the Sabbath. The Sabbath was a gift to mankind and should never have become a burden.

Mark 2:23-3:6. Sometimes we forget that the Pharisees were not always opposed to the Jesus movement. In Luke 13:31 we see the Pharisees warn Jesus that Herod was planning to kill him. While they disagreed on many issues, there were many commonalities between Jesus and the Pharisees and Jesus spent a lot of time in the company of the Pharisees. In the first of two Sabbath encounters, Jesus was travelling through the grainfields with both His disciples and the Pharisees just before the harvest season—they were almost certainly travelling together and dialoguing as they travelled.

In this encounter the Pharisees charged the disciples of Jesus with doing something unlawful on the Sabbath.^{22 23} During the late 2nd Temple period the oral traditions defined meal preparation as a form of work, which would be forbidden on the Sabbath. This was a valid question and one that had practical implications in the daily life of the community. These types of discussions are still common today in the church, although with different cultural and practical questions, and often result in slight differences of opinion—but hopefully not disunity.

In His defense, Jesus made reference to David's use of 'holy bread' in the Temple in 1 Samuel 21:1-6 to demonstrate a higher principle that human need is more important than religious ritual. In Judaism, both ancient and modern, the Sabbath is considered a gift and a blessing that God gave the world. The Sabbath was a time of refreshing and renewal, community worship and important time with family. But like all gifts it has to be received and cannot be imposed.

Jesus could have ended the discussion here, having made His point and bringing a verse from the Scriptures to defend His argument. However, Jesus wanted to make one more point. Not

²² The Torah provides a provision in which the poor and hungry can glean produce from a field (Deuteronomy 23:25) without the action considered stealing. The issue the Pharisees had wasn't the gleaning itself but the day in which the disciples were doing it.

²³ Jesus Himself was not charged with gleaning, however, He allowed His disciples to prepare the food. His non-participation doesn't indicate that Jesus Himself adhered to the strict Sabbath interpretations of the sages of His day nor does His permission indicate that He actively fought against their interpretation.

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only was Sabbath made for man, but the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath. Mark does not record any pushback to this statement by Jesus from the Pharisees nor of any questions from the disciples. Perhaps no one understood that Jesus was making a reference to Himself.

Mark's narrative then brings us into a Synagogue.²⁴ The ministry of Jesus was so well known that, when confronted with someone who was injured, the people in the synagogue knew what Jesus was likely to do. Previously, in Mark 1:32, Jesus waited until after the Sabbath had ended to heal but now, they (presumably the Pharisees) watched intently to see if He would heal on the Sabbath.

Rather than simply heal the man, Jesus opened a discussion on the theological and doctrinal issue—one that was very important to practical living.²⁵ Jesus asked a question.²⁶ The question by Jesus emphasized the truth about the Sabbath: there is no wrong day to do something good—for goodness comes from God.

The man's hand is described as withered—dried up like a dying plant. Yet he is commanded to stretch forth his hand. This would have been difficult to do and required effort on his part to move a mostly paralyzed part of his body. Having defended His action on a theological level, using an argument that was (or would shortly become) the commonly accepted practical doctrine of His time, Jesus healed the man.

Mark states that Jesus actually got mad at the people in the synagogue. They should have, and actually did, know better. But they acted out of stubbornness. Not only was Jesus angry but He was also hurt, distressed—there should always be room in our hearts for repentance. But in the end, pride and stubbornness brought two parties that were theological and political enemies

²⁴ Rather than being a chronological or topographical continuation from His previous discussion with the Pharisees, this seems to be a topical continuation as Mark focused on the Sabbath. It seems likely this is from late in Jesus' career (and possibly in the south) as the Pharisees of the Galilee continued to positively interact with Jesus for much of His ministry (such as Mark 2, where Jesus and the Pharisees are commonly in close proximity and dialogue and Luke 13:31 where the Pharisees tried to save Jesus' life.)

²⁵ See Hebraic Perspective.

²⁶ Asking questions was a very Hebraic thing to do. In the world of the Jewish sages you taught by asking questions rather than simply telling the people things forthrightly. Something passed down to the church through the Catechism, "a summary of the principles of Christian religion in the form of questions and answers." (*Oxford Dictionary: Catechism*)

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together.²⁷ Even among the Pharisees, a number of them decided that they wanted to destroy Jesus.²⁸

²⁷ As the leadership of Israel was being decided a generation before the Roman conquest, around 800 Pharisees were crucified, after their wives and children were executed before their eyes. In turn, when the Pharisees retook partial control, many of the Saducees who had participated in their murder were assassinated.

²⁸ We also know that, among the Pharisees, a number opened their eyes, unstopped their ears, and became the disciples of Jesus.