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Genesis 2:1-3

Fourth Message

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ENTERING GOD'S REST

SERIES: OUR STORY OF ORIGINS

Today is Sunday. Is it also the Sabbath? How will you spend the rest of the day? Will you treat it like any other day? Or are there certain things that you will not allow yourself to do on Sunday? I'm from Scotland, the land of strict Christian sabbatarianism. In the movie *Chariots of Fire* Eric Liddle chides two young boys for playing soccer on Sunday: "Sabbath's not a day for playing football." Is that what Sabbath is about—a day for not doing things, a day that interrupts our regular pattern of life? For me growing up, Sunday was completely different from other days. With my parents Sunday's meals were the simplest of the week. Now when I return to the UK Sunday lunch is the biggest meal of the week, for my sisters and their families observe the time-honored tradition of the Sunday roast after church; but still the day is different. Through college and grad school I never did any school work on Sunday; I spent the day at church and with church families, usually enjoying leisurely meals.

Then I came to the US and found a completely different feel to the day. In the UK shops were not open on Sundays, but here everything was open. I still remember my angst the first time I went to the mall on Sunday; I wasn't sure I should be doing what I was doing.

I find that Christians are very confused about Sunday. Is it a day of rest? Should it be like any other day or should it be distinctive? Or should we instead be observing Saturday, like the Seventh Day Adventists and Seventh Day Baptists?

In our study of the creation account we come to the seventh day.¹ But before the seventh day there is a summary statement.

The Cosmos (2:1)

Thus the heavens and the earth were completed in all their vast array. (Gen 2:1 TNIV)

This matches the summary in 1:1, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." God created it all, forming and filling a world for his pleasure. Starting with a blank slate, an earth that was formless and void, God has formed it and filled it. In three days he formed the cosmos, creating different realms in space and time. He separated light from darkness, the waters above from those below, and the sea from the dry land. This dry land then sprouted vegetation. After three days the world had form; it had the structure to support life.

In the second set of three days God filled the cosmos, filling the realms he had formed with their appropriate residents: the sun, moon and stars in the day and night; the birds and fish in the sky and sea; the animals on the land. In seven acts God formed the cosmos and filled all of its realms. Then in an eighth act he went further, creating the human—male and female—to be his presence on earth.

He created the heavens and the earth "in their vast array." Other translations render this "and all their host" or similar. This word *host* is most frequently encountered in the title "the Lord of Hosts," where it refers to the armies of heaven that are ready at his disposal. The

word is used for troops arrayed in order. Here it is used for the contents of the heavens and the earth: the lights in the heavens, and the living creatures in the three realms of the earth. They are all arrayed in order. They are all in their proper place, where they belong.

The Septuagint translates this term with the Greek word *kosmos*. The Greeks used this word to denote order: armies drawn up in battle array, rowers seated at their oars, the constitution that regulated human society. Greek philosophy used this term for the world, the whole universe functioning in an ordered manner. That's what the cosmos is: a harmonious, orderly, functioning whole. The Greeks marveled at how this could be: there must be some underlying world order, they said. The Israelites had an answer: of course it functions as an orderly whole, for God made it all. It all fits together. It all works together: what we now call the web of life—this interconnectiveness of all things. It all seems so finely tuned. This is one of the primary arguments of those who advocate Intelligent Design. The earth orbits at just the right distance from the sun. The earth is pitched at just the right angle to give a suitable alternation of seasons. The birds, the fish and the animals depend upon one another. The land interacts with the sea. And on and on and on. This is a major part of what it means to be good, to be very good: it all works, it all does what it is supposed to. This is the host of the heavens and the earth, this is its vast array: it is all ordered.

But the semantic range of the Greek word *kosmos* extends further to include adornment, especially of women. Hence our word cosmetic. From the Latin word used here, *ornatus*, we get our words ornate, adornment and ornamentation. This is what God did in forming and filling the world. He not only made it functional; he also made it beautiful. He adorned his cosmos.

He made two categories of vegetation: the seed-bearing plants and the fruit-bearing trees; the birds and the fish; and three categories of animals: the livestock, the wild animals and the creepy-crawlies. That's seven categories, if you're keeping count—and I hope you've seen by now that we need to keep count of such things in this chapter. But God didn't just make one of each; he could presumably have made a functional world like that. No, he made each according to its kind: ten times for seven categories we're told that each is after its kind. He made lots of different types of seed-bearing plants, but they are all seed-bearing plants after their kind. He didn't make just one type of creepy-crawly, though we might wish that he had; he made millions of them, but they're each after their kind, they're each a creepy-crawly. Why did God do this? Purely in order to make a well-ordered universe that functioned well? I don't think so. Many of you are engineers, so you understand that the fewer variables the more easily you can control a system. It would be much simpler to create a functional, well-ordered cosmos in which everything worked if God had filled it with one type of seed-bearing plant, one type of fruit-bearing tree, one type of bird and so on. But God didn't do this. He filled it with enormous variety. He adorned his world with beauty.

When Job doubted God's management of the moral universe, God directed his attention to creation. He challenged him, "Tell me, if you understand... Surely you know!" (Job 38:4-5). For four chapters God pointed Job to the created order, pointing out all sorts of animals and asking if he could understand it, much less control it. At the end Job humbly confessed, "Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know" (Job 42:5). Looking at the created world helped Job have confidence in God. If God could look after all this, sustaining it all, then he was a God who would uphold moral order.

I planted a bird-of-paradise plant in our garden specifically to remind me of God's ornamentation of his world. Can evolution really explain the beauty of its flower? All around us are animals, plants and "natural phenomena" through which the Lord displays his glory. Many of them are never seen by any human: God put them there for himself not for us. Jesus said that it is God who feeds the ravens and clothes the lilies (Matt 6:25-34; Luke 12:22-31); Jesus uses this example to encourage us to have faith in God, just like Job. Last year's BBC series *Planet Earth* captured some of the marvel of this wonderful world. Scientists are far from understanding how it all works together. The believer is left marveling at God who created the heavens and the earth in all their vast array. We should be bemused with the creativity, good humor and extravagance of the Creator.

And then there's us. We're also part of this vast array. But we aren't made after our kind. There aren't different species of humans. We're all one species and we're all made in God's image, after God's kind. The humans take their place in this ordered, ornamented cosmos. But we haven't been told yet where the humans are to live. The birds are in the sky, the fish in the sea, the animals on the land. We won't find out where God intends for the human to live until the next section (Gen 2:4-25).

Thus the heavens and the earth were completed and all their hosts. Everything is in its right place, and it all works. It works because it's all very good, that is, it serves the purposes for which it was made. It's very good because God made it. He's the only one with sufficient wisdom, understanding and power to pull it off.

But there's more; something lies beyond the ordered, ornamented cosmos created in six ordered days. Beyond the six days lies a seventh.

The Seventh Day (2:2-3)

By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. Then God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done. (2:2-3)

After the six days comes the seventh. After six days of work comes a day of rest. But look how many verbs there are on this day: God finished, rested, blessed and made holy. For one who was enjoying sabbath rest God had a busy day, such a busy day that many modern translations help him out by moving some of his work to the sixth day. Did God finish his work "on the seventh day" (NRSV, ESV, JPS), "by the seventh day" (NIV, TNIV, NASB, HCSB), or "on the sixth day" (REB)? Can we be bold enough to leave God's act of completion on the seventh day?

The account of the seventh day does not have the same structure as the six days, but it is carefully structured nonetheless. It can be laid out as three poetic couplets followed by an explanatory statement:

**And God finished on the seventh day
his work which he had done,
And God rested on the seventh day
from all his work which he had done,
And God blessed the seventh day
and he sanctified it,
because on it he rested from all his work which God had created
to do.**

In Hebrew each of the three couplets has exactly seven words; TNIV uses 34 English words to translate these 21 Hebrew words. Within each couplet the first line ends with "the seventh day." Each time it is specifically *the* seventh day, not just a seventh day. This triad of sevens highlights the thrice-mentioned seventh day. It is the only day mentioned more than once. Parallelism requires that we keep the act of completion on the seventh day. What was God doing in these four actions? I think they belong together as a related set of verbs.

Finished: There is no need to move God's completion of his work to the sixth day. Neither the narrator nor countless generations of scribes who transmitted the text saw any contradiction between verses 1 and 2. After six days the heavens and the earth were complete in all their vast array, but it was only when God entered into the seventh day that his work is considered complete. On the seventh day his work arrived at its intended goal. Otherwise the seventh day becomes a mere appendage, rather than the day that lends meaning to the other six days.

Rested: Having brought his work into a state of completion, to its intended goal, God rested. Rest is a confusing concept. Is one allowed to do anything when resting? From a scientific perspective, rest is the absence of motion. True rest is achieved at absolute zero, the temperature at which all motion ceases. This can't be the state that God entered for the cosmos would have come to an immediate halt. It also doesn't sound very attractive, living at 0 K? Is there a better way of understanding rest?

The Bible describes both spatial and temporal rest, using different verbs for the two. The spatial verb, *nuah*, is first used in Gen 2:15, "The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden." The verb "put" is the causative form of "rest," i.e., "cause to rest." This can't imply absence of motion, for the Lord immediately gives Adam two tasks: working and guarding the garden. Later God brought the Israelites into the Promised Land, where he gave them rest. This didn't mean that they did nothing. No, they carried on all the activities of living as a nation. What it does imply is that God took them from a realm where they didn't belong and put them where they did belong, there to live out their daily lives. He took Adam from the ground (*adamah*) and settled him in the garden, the sanctuary; he took Israel from Egypt and settled them in the Promised Land, the new sanctuary. In both cases God put his people where they belonged; both Adam, the first human, and Israel, the new humanity, belonged in the sanctuary, for God had made and redeemed them for himself.

I think that temporal rest works in a comparable way in time. Here the Hebrew verb is *shabbat*. When God entered into temporal rest on the seventh day he didn't come to an absolute stop. He continues to uphold his creation through his word; if he were to stop this then the universe would immediately cease to function. He carries on his everyday activity of being God within the realm of belonging.

Blessed: God's third activity on the seventh day is to bless it. On the fifth day he had blessed the sea and winged creatures (1:22). They were the first living creatures created. I assume that the land animals, living creatures like them, are covered under this blessing also. On the sixth day he had blessed the human (1:28). In each case the blessing was, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth." Blessing endows abundant and effective life. God would grant the living creatures and the human the potency to fulfill his command, namely to fill the earth. Blessing confers success; it confers a forward moving trajectory in life. Now for the third time God confers a blessing. I assume a progression: blessing the living creatures is significant, blessing the human is even more significant, blessing the seventh day is the most significant of all. The living creatures are special, the human is more special, the seventh day is most special. What does it mean to endow the seventh day with abundant and effective life, to grant it potency so it will be successful? It means it will achieve the purpose God intends for it. This purpose is given in the next verb.

Sanctified: God's fourth and final activity on the seventh day is to sanctify the day, to make it holy. The Bible distinguishes between two realms: the ordinary and the extra-ordinary, the common and the sacred, the profane and the holy. To be common or profane does not imply that something is bad, no matter how we use those words in English. It implies that it is ordinary. The fundamental idea of the holy is that it is other. God is holy; God is other. There is a fundamental divide within the universe, between creator and creature. On one side is God who is altogether other than his creation. On the other side is his creation. By the end of the sixth day there are these two fundamentally different realms: God the Creator in the realm of the other, and his creation in the realm of the common. This doesn't imply that creation is bad. Quite the opposite: the creation is very good, it is exactly what God intended it to be. But God did something special with the seventh day; he sanctified it, he made it holy, he transferred it from the realm of the common into the realm of the holy. He pulled the seventh day into his realm.

So the climax of creation is the consecration of time. Here we have yet another major difference from the creation accounts of the surrounding cultures, for their accounts all end with the consecration of space, usually the building of a temple. The temple that God builds for himself is a temple in time not in space.

This remarkable action establishes an eschatology. Eschatology is the study of last things, of what will happen in the last days. We usually associate it with books like Daniel and Revelation. But eschatology begins at least as early as Gen 2:3. God's action of sanctifying the seventh day establishes a discontinuity within the time fabric of the universe: six days in ordinary time, and a seventh in holy time. Beyond the very good lies the holy. Might not God therefore want eventually to move all of time into the holy? There is plenty in Scripture to suggest that the seventh day be interpreted eschatologically, that it be understood as the goal towards which God is moving his entire creation. Notice that this eschatology exists before the Fall, before the need for redemption.

The seventh day has no evening or morning. God does not leave his state of rest. Though he continues to be active in the world he has made, upholding creation and pursuing redemption, he does so from a state of rest. This seventh day is God's realm, but it is not yet the human's realm.

Israel and Sabbath

In the Old Testament the paradigmatic act of redemption is the exodus from Egypt. God delivered his people from bondage in Egypt where they had no rest. He brought them into the land promised to Abraham, where he gave them spatial rest. Along the way, at Sinai, he gave them the gift of the Sabbath day (*shabbat*). God commands his people to sanctify the Sabbath, observing it as a day of rest on which no work is done. In the Ten Commandments as given at Sinai, he bases this on 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." (Exod 20:11)

In the ten commandments as repeated by Moses forty years later, he bases this on redemption:

"Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the LORD 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." (Deut 5:15)

God created Israel for the Sabbath and redeemed Israel for the Sabbath. Or, better, God created humanity and then redeemed Israel as a new humanity for something which the Sabbath symbolized.

On the Sabbath, Israel was invited to fall into the pattern established by God when he completed his work and rested. This established a rhythm to the week. Each week the Israelites took a journey through time, through six days of ordinary time into one day of holy time. The Sabbath was the goal of the week, the day that gave meaning to the other six days. Each week Israel mimicked God. But after each Sabbath they returned to ordinary time and had to start the journey over again.

This rhythm was observed within two larger rhythms. Every seventh year Israel was to give her land a sabbatical year, a year of rest from cultivation (Lev 25:1-7). After every seventh sabbatical year, i.e., every fiftieth year, Israel was to celebrate a Jubilee Year, a year of liberty in which slaves were set free and land restored to its rightful owner (Lev 25:8-55).

These cycles of a week, of seven years, and of fifty years were powerful reminders that there lay something beyond. Beyond the common lay the sacred, the holy. Beyond the six days lay the seventh. Beyond the six years lay the seventh. Beyond the seven sevens lay the fiftieth. Israel had an eschatology long before the prophets spoke of the day of the Lord.

Such was the ideal. It is doubtful whether Israel ever observed this rhythm. The prophets chastised Israel for neglecting the Sabbath. One of the reasons given for the exile is Israel's failure to observe the sabbatical years. Therefore Israel was expelled from the land so the land could enjoy its backlog of sabbath rest (2 Chr 36:21). It seems that the exile cured Israel of sabbath neglect. The exile produced the scribes who devoted themselves to studying Torah and teaching it to the people. Judaism as it emerged over the next few centuries went in two different directions in its thinking about Sabbath.

One strand of thinking, represented by the Pharisees, by Rabbinic Judaism and by modern Orthodox Judaism, sought to legislate Sabbath observance, ruling on what actions were and were not permissible on the Sabbath day. This is the attitude we see among the Pharisees in the gospels. This is also the direction taken by much of Protestant Christianity.

But a different attitude emerged. Some of the early rabbis understood Sabbath as a “token of eternity.” They saw that God had granted his people the privilege of a foretaste of eternity every seventh day. This created a longing for Sabbath, both the Sabbath each week and the Sabbath that would not end. Medieval rabbis regarded Sabbath as a queen, whose arrival they welcomed each Friday evening. From this attitude developed a beautiful liturgy, extolling Sabbath. We get a glimpse of this in *Fiddler on the Roof*, where Sabbath is not an interruption to the week, but the goal of the week.

Jesus and Sabbath

Jesus lived in a Jewish world much concerned about the proper observance of Sabbath. The Pharisees treated him as almost one of their own, as a rabbi who taught Torah to his disciples. But Jesus kept doing things that offended them. Not least of these are his healings on Sabbath days. He healed a man with a withered hand (Matt 12:9-14; Mark 3:1-6; Luke 6:6-11), a crippled woman (Luke 13:10-17), a man with dropsy (Luke 14:1-6), a paralytic at the pool of Bethesda (John 5), and a man born blind (John 9). Why did Jesus choose the Sabbath for doing so many of his healing miracles? Was it just to tweak the noses of the Pharisees? Or did he see something in the Sabbath that made it the most appropriate day on which to heal someone? The seventh day was the climax and goal of creation. The Sabbath was God’s gift to Israel, rooted in both creation and redemption. Surely, then, Sabbath was the most appropriate day for Jesus to release people from bondage, for him to restore people’s useless limbs and eyes to being good once more. Sabbath was the day for making people complete so they could enter into rest. Jesus’ Sabbath healings were also a token of eternity. As Jesus said when he healed the crippled woman, “should not this woman, a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has kept bound for eighteen long years, be set free on the Sabbath day from what bound her?” (Luke 13:16).

The Church and Sabbath

The early Christians met on the first day of the week (Acts 20:7), but they did not transfer the Sabbath to Sunday. Paul, formerly the most fanatical of Pharisees, and therefore extremely zealous about Sabbath observance, realized that Sabbath was just a shadow of a reality that had now arrived. He told the Colossians,

Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ. (Col 2:16-17)

Sabbath was a token of eternity. It pointed forward to the eschatological goal at the end of time. But God has brought that eternity to earth in the middle of time in Jesus Christ.

The fullest treatment of Sabbath rest is in Hebrews 3–4, where the writer engages in a lengthy discourse on Psalm 95:7b-11. This psalm calls Israel to worship the Lord and avoid the disobedient example of the generation that came out of Egypt. The psalmist urges the worshippers, “Today, if only you would hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did...in the wilderness” (Ps 95:7-8; cf. Heb 3:7-8). The first generation had hardened its hearts in unbelief, provoking God’s judgment, “You shall never enter my rest” (Ps 95:11; cf. Heb 3:11). Instead, they wandered aimlessly around in the wilderness for 38 years

until God replaced them with the next generation. But, argues Hebrews, God has appointed a day, called “Today,” for people to enter into his rest, just as he entered into his rest on the seventh day.

There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; for those who enter God’s rest also rest from their own work, just as God did from his. Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will perish by following their example of disobedience. (Heb 4:9-11)

How do we enter into God’s rest? We enter into God’s rest by faith and obedience. This entrance into God’s rest is actually a two-stage process. We first enter into God’s rest through faith in Christ. Ceasing from our own labors, we finally admit that we need to be made whole by God in Christ and through his Spirit. Coming to Christ we find rest. But this rest is itself a token of eternity, a down-payment of something yet to come. The goal of entering into God’s full rest still lies ahead. In the last two chapters of the Bible we see a glimpse of the end of time. In the new heavens and the new earth there will be no sun or moon, not even any darkness or night. All time will be holy. God will move all of time into his seventh day. He will do the same with space. The whole cosmos will be holy, will be in the realm of the other, in the realm of God. What will this look like? I have no idea; I have no way of knowing, for I am so bound to ordinary space and time. But what I do know is that we shall be in the realm of God. We shall see him. We shall be bathed with the radiance of his glory, radiance with which he bathed the seventh day. And we who persevere in faith and obedience will enter into God’s full rest. Not by our own efforts, but through what God has done in and through his Son. I say both faith and obedience. The Bible sees little distinction between the two. The obedience isn’t about what you can and can’t do on the Sabbath. It’s about hearing God’s word and responding with faith to his call to Today enter into his rest.

Today is the day for accepting Jesus’ invitation, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest” (Matt 11:28). When we are living in Christ, invigorated by the Spirit, we are living in the realm of the holy. Holy time is not restricted to one day in seven, whether that be Saturday or Sunday. Today is not Sabbath; it is what Sabbath pointed to. In turn, both Sabbath and Today point towards the Seventh Day that will fill all of time. Both are tokens of eternity. Sabbath was one day in seven. Today is seven days in seven. The rest to come will be timeless.

So it is not a matter of the observance of days and what we can and can’t do on a Saturday or Sunday. Entering into God’s rest is a matter of hearing the word of the Lord as Jesus says, “Come unto me and rest.” We finally admit that we are broken and weary. Out of our bondage, sorrow and night we come to Jesus, into the freedom, gladness and light that he gives us when we come to rest in him. And we look forward to that day when our faith shall be sight and we shall live fully in the realm of God. In the meantime, as God fills us with his Spirit, we live in the realm of the holy, seven days a week.

1. See also my earlier sermon, “Sabbath: A Token of Eternity (Gen 2:1-3).” Sept. 20, 1998, Catalog no. 1176.