



Roanoke, Virginia

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“Jesus Chooses Kairos Time”

Genesis 2:3

Exodus 20:8-11

Matthew 12:1-8

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I am grateful to my friend the Rev. Taylor Lewis Guthrie Hartman for the paper she wrote on the Matthew text for our preaching group, By the Vine. It was a great help as I prepared today’s sermon. Taylor is the pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Statesboro, GA, and is our guest speaker for the upcoming Trent Getaway Retreat.

Genesis 2:3. ³So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that [God] had done in creation.

Exodus 20:8-11. ⁸ Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. ⁹For six days you shall labor and do all your work. ¹⁰But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. ¹¹For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.

Matthew 12:1-8. At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the sabbath; his disciples were hungry, and they began to pluck heads of grain and to eat. ²When the Pharisees saw it, they said to him, ‘*Look, your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the sabbath.*’ ³He



said to them, ‘Have you not read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? ⁴He entered the house of God and ate the bread of the Presence, which it was not lawful for him or his companions to eat, but only for the priests. ⁵Or have you not read in the law that on the sabbath the priests in the temple break the sabbath and yet are guiltless? ⁶I tell you, something greater than the temple is here. ⁷But if you had known what this means, “I desire mercy and not sacrifice”, you would not have condemned the guiltless. ⁸For the Son of Man is lord of the sabbath.’

Sometimes, when a pastor sits down to write her sermon, she thinks primarily about the listeners, those folks seated in the pews. Every once in a while, however, she writes a sermon not only for those in the pew, but equally for her own hearing. My husband Chris, who is right down front and center this morning (b/c it’s where our five-year-old likes to sit), might be the first to tell you that I am not the most qualified, at least at this stage of life, to preach a sermon on Sabbath-keeping.

I would counter that perhaps that’s exactly *why* I need to preach it—if only so I can hear it for myself.

Sabbath is origin stuff. It has been with us from the very beginning—from the genesis of creation. It was meant to be innate and within us and rhythmic—a part of our very selves, the rhythm of our time.

Fast forward thousands of years, and we get to the story of Jesus. His people and the people all around him have forgotten the Sabbath’s pure intents. They’ve muddied things up a bit, and of course they have. They are human, and humans like to control things. After all, what feels more important or impressive than controlling *time*?

Today, there are notebook planners and phone apps for organizing your time. There are books and podcasts and TED Talks on getting the most out of your time. It’s a whole industry. What a superpower it would be if we could actually control it. Time.

I have been known to say I wish there were two of me, or I wish there were an extra day a week when the whole world froze, and I got to run around and catch up on things.

You know, I kind of hate it when people talk to me about self-care. I feel judged and criticized because Sabbath can feel impossible. It can feel like we’ll never achieve it. It’s not something that can be on our checklist of things to do because it isn’t a thing to *do*, it isn’t a thing that can be checked off, is it?



We have plenty to *do*. I can't help but imagine how many of us spend all our precious free time running errands, catching up on laundry, catching up on email and bills, on the lives of our children or grandchildren. When the weekend is over and Monday rolls back around, as it always does, we wish it could be Friday again, so that perhaps we could finally get some rest. It's a vicious cycle, isn't it?

I wonder, are there messages of rest and sabbath that drive you bonkers? All the Instagram posts and Tik Tok videos about self-care can feel so draped in judgement. They can feel so privileged, so achievement oriented, like sabbath is a thing to do rather than a way to be. Holy rest is what we're after—not some pretty, image-driven idea of a stress-free life—but something deeper than surface level.

My friend Taylor shared this story with our preaching group this spring. One summer, while a student at Harvard Divinity School, the Yard underwent grass re-seeding. As you can imagine, Harvard Yard is a ridiculously manicured place. To prevent students and tourists from stepping on the fresh seed, landscapers put up tiny little posts with holes at the top around the perimeter with a lovely little rope strung through each little hole. Every night, Taylor's husband Blair would go out and pull the rope as much as he could to loosen one side and make the other side taut; no longer a perfect circle, yet the rope was still the same length. Blair thought this harmless little protest was hilarious. But Taylor could have crawled under a rock. She wanted to slink away behind a shrub, she was so mortified. She's a rule follower! While Blair was having the time of his life with this harmless little mischief, Taylor was so afraid they'd get caught. What if someone saw him?!

You might know this feeling, too. This bound up kind of feeling. This need to do things just right—this inner monologue of, “We have to do XYZ, because if we don't, then...”

Is that how God intended Sabbath? Was it meant to be a rule of XY and Z? Was it meant to be a rigid division of our days? That rope in Harvard Yard was the same length. Nothing about its bounds shifted. But its shape? Its shape was malleable. It could move and change and be *reformed*.

We need Jesus' interpretation not only for the sake of what he says, but simply that he says it. In Matthew 12, he provides space, another way, and an example. “I tell you, something greater than the temple is here,” he says. The Sabbath rules of Jesus' day had, in some ways, made the law into a burdensome yoke—ironic given that the Sabbath is meant to bring rest from the burden of work. Jesus comes along, allowing his disciples to pluck grain, engaging in conversation, knowing that the Pharisees could be watching for him, waiting for him or his followers to mess up.



And what does Jesus do? He pulls at the boundary and stretches it where it needs to be stretched for the sake of his disciple's flourishing. He returns looseness to the law the religious establishment made taut. To the Pharisees, it looks like disobedience and chaos, but to Jesus and, I hope, to his disciples, this amoeba-shaped boundary looks like freedom to move within and around. It looks like space to explore and be free. Is that not the gift of the Sabbath after all?

The Oxford English Dictionary defines "time" as the "indefinite continued progress of existence." But in Greek, there are two words for time: *Chronos* and *Kairos*.

The Greek word *Chronos* refers to time in a quantitative sense. It's where we get the term chronological. Chronological time is time that you can divide into minutes and days and years. It refers to time as duration. It's what we mean when we ask, "What time is it?" or "How much time do I have?"

The Greek word *Kairos* means time in a qualitative sense—not the time that a clock measures, but time that cannot be measured at all, time that is characterized by what happens in it. *Kairos* time is the kind of time you mean when you say, "The time is ripe," or, "I had a good time," or, "It's time to tell the truth." *Kairos* time is what the writer of Ecclesiastes meant when he wrote, "To everything there is a season..."—a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to keep silence and a time to speak.¹

Chronos is how we measure and count our days quantitatively. *Kairos* is how we experience, live, and understand our existence qualitatively.

Jesus moved through time deliberately. If we were to plot his journey to the cross and empty tomb, we would see that his travels made no geographic sense. He is on his way to Jerusalem, yes, but his path meanders this way and that—from Bethsaida to Cana, from Capernaum to Gennesaret, and Samaria to the River Jordan. The man did not stay still. And yet, the whole time, the whole *Chronos* time, he was headed toward one place.

I don't know about you, but it can feel like I'm all over the map sometimes. There is so much to *do*, so much to *produce*. It can feel like my life lacks prayerful attention. And because my attention is so scattered, it can feel like I don't have enough time for the kind of *Kairos* moments Jesus makes possible here. It can feel like we're hungry for some grain, but we don't know how to stop and pluck it.



Here's the thing: Jesus was set on a *Chronos* path. Because he knew exactly where he was going, he had space for *Kairos* time to break in and reform—not only him, but the whole lot around him. Maybe *they* thought they were meandering all around through Samaria and Galilee, but Jesus knew what he was doing.

Inside his timeline, inside his guided journey to Jerusalem, Jesus stretched his path with teachable moments—same rope length, different shape. He let questions be asked. He let himself be interrupted. He let the holy seep in and pour out of him, loosening the chains of those bound up by time.

I am the worst version of myself in the last 15-minute push to get out the door on a weekday morning. I am often running late, and in those last few precious moments, I remember someone needs to brush her teeth, or I run back inside to get the homemade pink playdough I forgot to pack for the class, or I lose my patience for one of a dozen reasons that are not really worth losing one's patience over. It is like a final sprint to make it from our driveway to this parking lot on a weekday morning. But sometimes, our daughter asks me when we're blocks away from the preschool drop off to go see the lions—the two statues out in front of the beautiful Victorian home just up the hill on Mountain Avenue. This little detour can cost us a precious moment—but on my better days, I take a deep breath and let my shoulders drop, and circle up one more block to see these stone creatures and giggle with a preschooler in her booster seat at the hats or masks or flowers the lions are donning in a given season. You see, sometimes, they're just plain lion statues, but sometimes they wear Uncle Sam hats atop their mane, or Easter bonnets, or they might be holding pots of clover between their front paws. And, the truth is, as harried as I am some mornings, I'm never sorry that we took the extra moment to go by and see them.

Maybe I still have a lot to learn about self-care. I'm sure I could manage my time better to keep my Sabbath day (which is Friday, by the way) boundaries. I'm not saying I shouldn't. But sometimes *Kairos* can happen inside the *Chronos*—sometimes the boundaries give and the shape changes.

Kairos-ity comes all the time, all the *Chronos* time. Minutes like freshly plucked grains, there and ready to eat if we but reach out and avail ourselves of the feast.

There's an image I want to share with you all. Below is the image of a screen-print that hangs in the National Gallery of Art, called "Wheat Field," by American artist Ben Shahn from 1958. The



image of the wheat holds a surprising pastel rainbow when you notice it—when you pause and pay attention—like Kairos in the Chronos time.

Link to *Wheat Field* and art details: <https://www.nga.gov/collection/art-object-page.45942.html>

As you notice this little gift of beauty and light, receive this reading of Mary Oliver’s poem “Invitation.”



Oh do you have time
to linger
for just a little while
out of your busy

and very important day
for the goldfinches
that have gathered
in a field of thistles

for a musical battle,
to see who can sing
the highest note,
or the lowest,

or the most expressive of mirth,
or the most tender?
Their strong, blunt beaks
drink the air

as they strive
melodiously

not for your sake
and not for mine

and not for the sake of winning
but for sheer delight and gratitude –
believe us, they say,
it is a serious thing

just to be alive
on this fresh morning
in the broken world.
I beg of you,

do not walk by
without pausing
to attend to this
rather ridiculous performance.

It could mean something.
It could mean everything.
It could be what Rilke meant, when he wrote:
You must change your life.ⁱⁱ

ⁱ Frederick Buechner, originally published in *The Hungering Dark*, accessed online at:
<https://www.frederickbuechner.com/quote-of-the-day/2019/7/17/quality-of-time>

ⁱⁱ Mary Oliver, "Invitation," *A Thousand Mornings* (New York: Penguin Books, 2013).

