

Sermon for Sunday, August 21, 2016
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
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It was a long time
since she had seen the sky.
Lying down sideways
and twisting her neck
was the only way
she could look up,
and it wasn't exactly something
that you do in public,
and the only place
she could have done it in private
was from the rooftop terrace of her house,
except that climbing the outside stairs
she was always afraid of falling,
and even more, coming down,
and so she had to make do
with glimpses of blue
from the corners of her eyes,
the sun's imagined yellow in the relentless heat,
the full moon's reflected light,
and the memory
of stars.

Eighteen years
she had lived like this,
eighteen years
of always looking down,
getting a crick in her neck
just to look forward,
and turning side to side
to get a glimpse
of the world that everyone else
saw as normal.

She knew the ground
far better than most,
the paving stones

with their cracks and pockmarks,
the dust ground fine where cart wheels passed over it,
coarser in the center between the wheel ruts,
gravel thrown along the sides.
And after the first few years of stilted conversation
when all she had to offer
were her observations on dirt,
she was no longer invited to drink sweet minted tea
 in the company of friends,
her conversation too limited,
her hands too clumsy,
or perhaps her eyes too sharp,
too great a risk
that she might pass comment
on the cleanliness
of their floors.

She'd become accustomed, resigned
 to this lonely life,
used to being loomed over, talked over, passed over.
Invisible.

So it was unexpected
when she heard her name
that morning
at the synagogue.
She'd gone to hear the teacher;
the word had gone out
that he was not to be missed,
and it was a welcome change
from the usual conversation that passed over her head.
Most of the time
she was ignored,
so she was surprised to hear someone call her name
and even more surprised
when she angled her body and turned her head
to see that it was the teacher
who was calling to her.

And she shuffled over

and twisted to look up at him
 with one bright eye
 and Jesus spoke to her -
 to her and not over her! -
 and she felt the weight of his hands on her back,
 “woman, you are free”,
 and almost of its own accord
 her back creaked
 and stretched
 and she stood up straight.
 And looked him in the eye
 and began
 to thank
 God.

Though she might as well not have bothered.
 Because she was still invisible, at least to the leader
 of the synagogue.
 He doesn't even seem to notice her. Instead
 he becomes obsessed
 with what Jesus has done,
 and what Jesus has done, in his mind,
 is work.

You see,
 it's the sabbath, the day that is holy to God.
 And in the ten commandments it says,
 “Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. For six days you shall labour and do all
 your work. But 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. For 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.”

The sabbath
 was a time that was to be kept holy, a time
 when nothing interfered
 with the worship of God.
 So no one was to work, not even servants or employees or even foreigners
 who might not even worship

the Hebrew God.
And not animals either.
And there were a whole network of minor laws
that laid out how you kept the sabbath,
things like what constituted work and what didn't,
whether you could feed your animals
or save a life.
It was a time
for the whole community to rest.

But it's interesting.
The version of the commandments that I just read from
comes from the book of Exodus.
You remember the story,
when Moses went up Mount Sinai,
and came back with two stone tablets
with the commandments written on them.

But that's not the only place
where the commandments are recorded in scripture.
The other place is in Deuteronomy,
as the people of God
get ready to cross the Jordan
into the promised land.
Moses knows
that he will die before they get there,
and so he gives
a final set of instructions
of how they should live when they get there,
which is basically the whole of the book of Deuteronomy,
and in it,
he explains the ten commandments.

And in this version, the commandment about the sabbath reads like this.
“Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy, as the Lord your God commanded you. For six days you shall labour and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, or your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock, or the resident alien in your towns, so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you. Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought

you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day.”

Did you hear the difference?

Instead of referring to God resting on the seventh day,
Moses talks about the sabbath as a time for the people to remember
that they were rescued from Egypt.

You see, close on forty years has passed.
When the commandments were first spoken,
the people had just escaped from Egypt,
and they weren't too sure
that they would ever make it to the promised land,
they weren't too sure
that they didn't want to go back.

Now
they are on the brink of entering the land.
They have seen God
leading them and guiding them.
And the story of that escape from Egypt,
the story of those forty years,
has become the story that defines them,
the central story of their faith.
And it's to that story,
that reading of the commandments
that Jesus referred
when he responded
to the leader of the synagogue.

“Remember the sabbath, you say?
I am remembering it!
I am remembering
God set us free from being slaves in the land of Egypt,
and therefore God commanded us to keep the sabbath day.
Shouldn't this woman
be set free too?”

You see
in some ways

the leader of the synagogue
was as bent over as the woman was.
His vision was restricted.
All he could see
was the way that he had always interpreted the law,
the way he had always practiced his faith.
He couldn't see
that there was another option
equally valid in tradition.
And worse,
he couldn't see
that God was actually at work
right there in front of him!

And it makes me wonder how often
we are like the leader of the synagogue.
How often
do we cling to the way we have always done something
and miss out
on seeing where God is at work now?

Recently I was reading an article that said
that the greatest danger for the church
is not that it has less influence in society,
or that fewer people are coming nowadays.
The greatest danger
is that we are tempted to spend our energy
looking backwards.

We remember a time
when church seemed to be at its peak,
when it was busy and fulfilling

Often that time
coincides with the times
when we were most deeply formed,
perhaps our teenage years, or when we had kids involved,
and we were involved with them.
We remember having a sense
that this was where God was.

And now things have changed
and we're not so sure.
If only
we could go back.

But of course, we can't.
Society has moved on,
and so have we,
and simply replicating the past
isn't possible.

But God
has not stopped working.
It may not be in the same ways as before,
but God is still at work.

And so I invite you
to lift up your heads.
Straighten your backs.
Look around you
and see where God is at work now,
and join in!