



Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue  
in the City of New York

The Reverend Andrew C. Mead, OBE, DD, *Rector*  
John Scott, LVO, D. Mus., *Organist and Director of Music*  
[www.SaintThomasChurch.org](http://www.SaintThomasChurch.org)

**Sunday, February 24, 2013**  
*The Second Sunday in Lent*

*Choral Evensong*  
*at 4pm*

+

A Sermon by  
The Reverend Victor Lee Austin, Ph.D.  
on  
Exodus 20:8  
Deuteronomy 5:12  
+

*Sermon Series: Commandments as Good News*  
**SERMON 5: KEEP HOLY THE SABBATH**

Most of the Ten Commandments are framed negatively, which makes people think that commandments pertain to things we shouldn't do. Not so the sabbath commandment. The sabbath, a positive commandment, shows the good news at the heart of every commandment: it is an invitation to listen to God and to respond positively, to enter into the joy, the love, and the life of God.

The sabbath commandment comes to us in two differing versions. First, from God's mouth in Exodus 20: "Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor, and do all your work; but the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; in it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your manservant, or your maidservant, or your cattle, or the sojourner who is within your gates; for in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and hallowed it."

That's 94 words. It is the longest commandment in the English of the RSV. *Remember*, it begins: a positive word telling us to do something. But how do we remember the sabbath? God says, *to keep it holy*; and at the end the commandment reverts to creation, when God rested and "blessed" and "hallowed" the 7<sup>th</sup> day. God made the sabbath holy in creation; God's commandment is to "remember" the day and "keep it holy."

Still, how does one remember it and keep it holy? First, "Six days you shall labor." The commandment tells us to work—work is built in. Indeed, to be human is to work. But working is not all there is to being human, for "the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; in it you shall not do any work." This prohibition—don't work on the sabbath—is to be interpreted by the positive commands, to remember and keep holy. And lest we think that the commandment means we don't work but it's okay for everyone else to go on working for us, God shows that he is speaking to both men and women and that not only should they not work but also their children, servants, cattle, and even sojourners (the non-Jews who lived among them in the land).

The positive reason for all this is somehow God's work in creation. God says to remember this day and keep it holy and don't work "for" the LORD has blessed and made holy this day. But why is that

a reason? Connect the dots: you, the hearer of the commandment, are to be holy like God. And one way you image God's holiness is through the weekly respite from work. Thus God teaches us that the human being conforms to God's own holiness through work punctuated by patterned rest.

When, forty years later, just before he died, Moses addressed the people and rehearsed for them again the Ten Commandments, most of the commandments were unchanged. There is a small change in the one for next week, about honoring parents. But the sabbath commandment has a huge change. Here it is from Deuteronomy 5: "Observe the sabbath day, to keep it holy, as the LORD your God commanded you. Six days you shall labor, and do all your work; but the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; in it you shall not do any work." So far, no change except the first word, which is "Observe" rather than "Remember." But hear what follows: "you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, or your manservant, or your maidservant, **or your ox, or your ass, or any of your cattle**, or the sojourner who is within your gates, **that your manservant and your maidservant may rest as well as you.**" Instead of simply "cattle," this time Moses says "your ox, or your ass, or any of your cattle." It may be that Moses, who judged cases throughout those 40 years, heard lots of complaining about animals that weren't cattle working on the sabbath; so he makes explicit that all your animals aren't supposed to work. Then he adds a whole phrase: "that your manservant and your maidservant may **rest** as well as you." In Exodus, we were reminded of God's rest and we were told to cease from work. In Deuteronomy, the point is for us and our servants—for all the human beings—to hallow the sabbath day not by merely ceasing from work but by doing something godlike: resting.

Why? Here Deuteronomy differs completely from Exodus. There's nothing about God's work of creation. Rather: "You shall remember that you were a servant in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out thence with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day." It is hard to over-emphasize the importance of this change. The point of the sabbath day is now to treat all human beings who work for us or are connected to us as capable and worthy of both work and rest. The people are to remember that they were once themselves slaves and the LORD delivered them; and in memory of that deliverance they are to rest and to make possible, as far as they can, the rest of others.

The meaning of this positive "rest"—the heart of the beauty and importance of the sabbath—is, I think, inexhaustible. The sabbath commandment in Exodus makes me want to be holy like God and to show, joyously, in my life, that I turn towards God dramatically one day a week. When I contemplate this commandment, I feel convicted about my complacency with others working while I turn to God. I sometimes wonder what it would be like to dedicate 24 continuous hours a week to the joy of the LORD. Then the sabbath commandment in Deuteronomy makes me want to pay so much more attention to all the people I interact with through the week, not to treat them as instruments of my own purposes, but to remember that we all have a common origin in servitude and we all have a common hope of freedom in the LORD, and I should care that they too are able to rest with me with the LORD.

Why, then, Sunday for us and not Saturday? The reason to keep holy the Sabbath was enriched between Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5. That enrichment continues. When Jesus rose from the dead on Sunday, he opened to all people the Exodus liberation—the sabbath reason given in Deuteronomy. The Holy Spirit was given on a Sunday, and we look for Jesus to return to inaugurate the new creation, which the Fathers called the Eighth Day, the new Sunday. All this and more we remember weekly by ceasing from work and celebrating the joyful "rest" of God, a rest that is nothing else than the full actualization of love.