

Sermon – 2nd Pentecost
Exodus 31:12-32:6 & Mark 2:23-28
June 3, 2018

“The Book That Is a Library – The Law/History of Israel”

The Bible ought to be the subject of every sermon, but the Bible as a written document will be our subject for the next 8 weeks. The Bible is a diverse collection of writings that are part of a unified story. A question several of you posed was “*how are the books of the Bible organized.*” I understood this to mean “*who* decided how the books were organized” and “*who* wrote them.” To the latter question, the succinct (and correct) answer is God – or more precisely the Holy Spirit. The North American Lutheran Church - accepts the Old and New Testament as “*the written word of God inspired by the Holy Spirit speaking through their authors*” – a statement from a 16th century document known as the “Formula of Concord”. To the former question – how are they organized, the answer is less clear.

As you can see in the illustration on the screen (*Wendt Slide*), the Jewish and Christian traditions organize them differently. The Old Testament is an oral history of the Jewish people which eventually became a written history under the direction of Jewish priests and scribes over many centuries. That written history begins in creation, which is hard to date, then moves to what we might call the creation of Israel through two people – Abraham and Sarah, who on the basis of details of their lives in Genesis 12-25 lived around 1800 BC.

These priests and scribes organized the 39 volumes of their written history into three sections, called “Torah”, or Law, “Nevi'im” or Prophets, and Ketuvim or “Writings.” In the illustration you see this in the top shelf, under the headings “*Torah, Former Prophets, Latter Prophets, and Writings.*” The Christian Old Testament organizes them slightly differently, as you can see in the middle shelf – “*History, Poetry, Major Prophets and Minor Prophets.*” The Jewish version is organized somewhat chronologically, beginning with creation in Genesis, continuing to the Prophet Malachi, said to have lived about 5 centuries before Jesus, followed by less chronologically identifiable books – the Psalms through I & II Chronicles.

I've selected a sample from the “history” section of the Christian version of the library, Exodus 31:12-32:6, and paired it with Mark 2:23-28 because of subject matter - observance of the Sabbath. Proper observance of the Sabbath was of great historical and religious importance to the Jewish people. Exodus is best known as the story of baby Moses being placed in a basket and set in the Nile River, found by the daughter of Pharaoh King of Egypt, and eventually called by God to lead the Israelites out of slavery, culminating in the giving of the 10 Commandments. Most folks stop, understandably, at the end of chapter 20 when the tablets of stone are brought down Mount Sinai.

Nearly all the remaining chapters of Exodus are devoted to worship rituals – the building of a tent of meeting called the tabernacle and intricate details right down to precise recipes for incense. The significance all this mind-numbing detail is intended to demonstrate how Israel, once forced to serve Pharaoh, a god like figure - are now free to serve the true God – and that “service” was exemplified by Sabbath observance.

That is why our lesson makes reference to the Sabbath being grounded in Creation (“*in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day he rested, and was refreshed*”). To not remember Sabbath correctly was to defy God’s good creation. God was “refreshed” on that day and so Israel, so all of us, need to be refreshed, and worship provides that refreshment. It was a matter of life and death for Israel.

If Israel let the details slip to the point that Sabbath was patterned according to their ways and not God’s they would repeat the sin of Eden – defying God’s good creation, being enticed by their surroundings and their sinful selves to answer the Serpent’s question “*did God really say*” assured that “*you will not die*” by living with just a few personal innovations– and discovering that in fact – they would. Exodus is history written for a singular purpose – to remind Israel where their life came from, who could be counted on to preserve it, and what the cost of disobedience to God boils down to – death. In other words, it is not enough to be obedient in a “*general sort of way.*” God created a world of order and Israel, particularly through its worship, was to reflect that order, and so bring the world back to its created goodness.

But, while details are important, the details must never become the end in themselves. Thus when we in the Christian faith read books like Exodus, we always take time to read Jesus and try to determine how Jesus read books like Exodus. Obviously, Mark tells us Exodus mattered to our Lord. Jesus is not saying “Sabbath worship” doesn’t matter – he is saying Sabbath worship must be God-centered and therefore it must be centered on what God created Sabbath for – human good. Everything in the Bible is ultimately about our welfare, and nothing is as important to our welfare as our worship of God.

Jesus criticized the Jewish leaders on the basis of their having made themselves masters of the Lord’s day. They made the mistake of assuming themselves to be owners of a gift of God through creation – in this case the Sabbath, instead of stewards of this gift of God. We do the same, by the way, when and however in regard to any gift of God – ourselves, our time and our possessions - we make ourselves owners instead of stewards. Jesus read the history of Israel in Exodus like this – how we treat the Sabbath, how we “*remember the day to keep it holy*” goes a long way in indicating how seriously we take Jesus’ lordship over every other aspect of our lives.

We Christians don’t “*have to keep the Sabbath*” in the legalistic ways Jews of Jesus’ day did or thought they had to, but that doesn’t mean we don’t have to keep it at all. Keeping Sabbath as God intended is the best way to guard ourselves from the fashioning of our own golden calves and in the process mend frazzled, tattered lives as only Jesus Christ the life of the world can.
AMEN