

Genesis 2:1–3
Easter Vigil
Kaiserslautern Ev. Luth. Ch.
April 8, 2023

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them. And on the seventh day God finished His work that He had done, and He rested on the seventh day from all His work that He had done. So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all His work that He had done in creation

Dearly bought hearers by the blood of Jesus Christ,

Throughout the season of Lent, we have been contemplating the days of creation and how they relate to the new creation that comes in our Lord Jesus Christ. We've covered the entire "Hexaemeron," the six days of creation, when God actually created all things that exist. Tonight, on the vigil of Easter, we contemplate the seventh day, the Sabbath Day, and its fulfillment in Jesus Christ, as well as the Eighth Day, the day that lasts for eternity. The Easter Vigil service is filled with Old Testament prophecies and pictures pointing ahead to our salvation in Jesus Christ. The first Old Testament account is Creation concluding with the seventh day, where God rested, not for Himself, but as an example to us.

In the Bible, the number six is considered incomplete. That's why you get the number 666 in the Book of Revelation, for example, the number of perfect imperfection. Always almost there, but not quite. Seven, however, is the number of perfection. From the seven days of creation to the seven letters of Revelation, the number seven pervades Scripture and the worship of God as the number of completion, perfection, wholeness. So the seven days of creation set up a pattern of seven for the rest of Scripture.

But why did God need to rest? It wasn't for Himself, but as an example for us. "The LORD God is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow

weary (Is. 40:28). God rested on the seventh day to show us the importance of stopping what we're doing to behold what has been done. God does not tire, but we do. The LORD ceases from His work on the seventh day as an example for us, implanted in the nature of time, to cease from our work and to use that time to focus on God and His work.

The Hebrew word for “he rested” is *shabbat*, which is where the word “Sabbath” comes from. When the people of Israel were wandering in the desert, God gave them manna from heaven for six days, and on the sixth day they were to gather enough to eat on the Sabbath, so that they need not bother with work of any kind. At Mount Sinai, the LORD then codified the Sabbath in the Ten Commandments He gave to His people, including the Third Commandment: “Remember the Sabbath Day by keeping it holy.” The Old Testament never outlines specifically what is included in the work people are to rest from. The implication is simply to rest from regular day to day operations, like working the ground or tending to the animals. There were also prohibitions against traveling (Ex 16:29–30) and even lighting a fire (Ex 35:3). If the invitation to rest wasn't enough, there was also the threat of the death penalty for anyone not resting on the Sabbath.

Over time, the Jews added more and more regulations to God's commandments, setting up a sort of hedge around the Law. The teachers wanted to make absolutely sure nobody was breaking one of God's rules. The teachers of the Law, the rabbis (then and now) enumerated dozens of categories and hundreds of sub-categories of work that were forbidden on the Sabbath. That's why Jesus's disciples were admonished for plucking heads of grain to eat on the Sabbath. The Pharisees considered this harvesting. Jesus, though, calls His disciples guiltless in this regard, and teaches us that: “the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath” (Matt 12:1–8; Mk 2:27). Is the one who set apart the Sabbath

for our good not able to determine what can and cannot be done on the day of rest? The rabbis persecuted Jesus Himself multiple times for His healing and casting out demons on the Sabbath. But in John 4, Jesus responds: “My Father is working until now, and I am working.” God ceased from creation on the seventh day, yet He continued upholding the universe. That’s what Jesus does, too. He continues upholding the universe by the word of His power, even on the Sabbath.

In all the examples of controversy over the Sabbath in the New Testament, we must remember that Jesus never broke the Sabbath; He fulfilled the Sabbath. Jesus came not to abolish the Law, but to fulfill it (Matt 5:17). The only thing broken were the commandments of men that had been set up against the commandments of God. Jesus, instead, gives us a true interpretation of the Sabbath, the day of rest. If the Pharisees would rescue a sheep that had fallen into a pit on the Sabbath, how much more so, ought they allow a man to be healed, to be rescued from the effects of sin? Jesus says: “it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath” (Matt 12:12). For this, the Pharisees went out and conspired against Jesus, how to destroy Him (Matt 12:14).

Finally, the teachers of the Law did hand Jesus over to destroy Him by crucifixion. Our Lord was nailed to the cross on a Friday, the sixth day. As man was created on the sixth day, so did *the* man die on the sixth day (John 19:5). Because the Sabbath was about to begin at sundown, the Jews asked Pilate that the legs of those crucified might be broken to speed up the process (John 19:31). A man sentenced to death was to be hanged on a tree, but his body was required to be buried that same day lest the land be defiled (Deut. 21:23–24). When the soldiers came to Jesus, He was already dead. Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus took the body of Jesus away, wrapped it with spices and linen cloths, and placed our Lord into the new tomb in the garden. There He would rest in death for the Sabbath. As God rested from His work of creation on the seventh day, so did Jesus rest from His work of new creation on the seventh day.

As J. S. Bach has it in the St. John Passion: “Rest in peace, you sacred limbs, I shall weep for you no more, rest in peace, and bring me also to rest. The grave that is allotted to you and contains no further suffering, opens heaven for me and shuts off hell.” Our Lord’s rest in the tomb sanctifies our rest in the tomb as well. When Christians go to their graves, it is but a sleep, even as our Lord Jesus slept a peaceful sleep of death.

And then the new week began. On the first day of the week, a Sunday, the women and some of the disciples went to the garden tomb but found it empty. Our Lord had burst the bonds of death and was risen from the dead! The man, Jesus, rose from the dust of the ground and brought with Him new life. By another way of counting, this first day of the week, one week after day one, could also be seen as “the eighth day.” That’s what many in the Early Christian Church called Sunday. The eighth day signifies new creation and eternity.

Hebrew boys, including Jesus, were circumcised on the eighth day. The Apostle Paul says that in Christ, “you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands . . . having been buried with Him in Baptism, in which you were also raised with Him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised Him from the dead” (Col 2:11–12). Baptism is the new circumcision, where God joins us to His people, which is why Baptisms often occurred on the eighth day after birth and why Baptismal fonts or baptistries are often constructed with eight sides. This is also why Peter emphasizes that eight people were saved in the ark, which corresponds to Baptism (1 Pet 3:20–21). It is through the waters of Holy Baptism that we joined to the death and resurrection of Christ, and so we enter the eighth day, the eternal day, already here in time.

This eighth day, or the renewed day one, is also why the early Christians started worshiping on the Lord’s Day (Rev 1:10), Sunday, instead of the old Sabbath, the seventh day.

The Sabbath is fulfilled in Jesus, who is Himself a “Sabbath rest for the people of God” (Heb 4:9). In Jesus, our consciences can rest before God every day of the week and for the rest of our lives because we know that our sins are covered and paid for, and that eternal life is ours. As our Lord rose again from the dead, never to die again, so will it be with us as well. We continue setting aside time from our usual work routine for recreation, sanctifying the Lord’s Day and other days to rest and to hear the preaching of God’s Word. There, our Lord Himself is recreating us, for the Word of God is living and active, until that day when we finally worship at the throne of the Lamb in the new heavens and the new earth. In the name of Jesus, Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen. We stand for the Offertory.