

OPENING HYMN

“Morning Has Broken” (ELW 556)

OPENING PRAYER

We give you thanks for bringing us together to study a portion of your Word, O God. We ask you to deepen our understanding and heighten our awareness of your love and faithfulness. Guide us with your Holy Spirit. Amen.

FOCUS VERSES

“Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy.” (Exodus 20:8)

“Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.” (Exodus 20:12)

MATERIALS NEEDED

- Bibles (NRSV)
- *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (ELW)
- Paper and pencils, or whiteboard

OPTIONAL

- *The Large Catechism of Dr. Martin Luther 1529: The Annotated Luther Study Edition*, ed. Kirsi I. Stjerna (Fortress Press, 2016)
- *Luther’s Small Catechism with African Descent Reflections*, ed. Joseph Bocko (Augsburg Fortress, 2019)
- *Luther’s Small Catechism: An Exposition of the Christian Faith in Asian Contexts and Cultures*, ed. J. Paul Rajashekar (The Association of Asians and Pacific Islanders, ELCA, 2019)

The Ten Commandments: Reviving the soul

Session two

Rhythms and respect
(Commandments 3 and 4)

BY CHRISTA VON ZYCHLIN

INTRODUCTION

Are the Ten Commandments still relevant? In March 2018, the magazine *Christianity Today* published a survey that found that more than half of Americans still found significance in God’s laws. Can you guess which commandment was voted least important? That’s right, the Sabbath! Only 49% of respondents believed that honoring the Sabbath was still meaningful. The commandment to honor parents fared a bit better, with 85% of Americans still considering this a worthwhile teaching

An ancient school of thought is that the commandments are listed in descending order of importance. Therefore commandment #1 (*You shall have no other gods*) is the key command, and the rest are interpretations of how to worship and honor God—and God only. However, this understanding would prioritize keeping the Sabbath and obeying parents over the commandments not to kill or lie. I’m guessing few people of any religion would agree with that today.

Jesus himself clearly does privilege some commandments over others. It might seem as if the two commandments covered in this session were two of his least favorite, too. Didn’t he get into trouble with the religious police for breaking the Sabbath? And as an adolescent, didn’t he turn his back on

his earthly parents when he overstayed that holiday visit to the temple? In light of Jesus' liberating teachings and example, do the two commandments regarding the Sabbath and parents still hold value for us today?

📖 **Read:** Exodus 20:1–17

Share aloud or reflect:

1. Take a quick poll of your group: Which do you consider the most important of the Ten Commandments? The least important?

A RHYTHM OF REST

📖 **Read:** Exodus 20:8–11 and Ecclesiastes 3:1–14

This week's theme at our congregation's preschool was Creation. Sitting on the chancel steps with batch after batch of only slightly unruly little ones, I watched the story unfold. Using a Godly Play (www.godlyplayfoundation.org) curriculum, our storyteller revealed six large panels with drawings of God's gifts of creation: "Light! Water! Earth and sky! Trees! Birds and fish! Animals and people!"

Then our storyteller paused dramatically. "God had one more gift," she said, bringing out (Surprise!) an utterly blank seventh panel. "...A day of rest, to consider and enjoy all the other beautiful gifts God had made." The children and I were in awe. Six days of creation. And on the seventh day, God created something altogether different—a day of rest and gratitude.

Children are lovers of order and rhythm. Good preschools generally have a carefully orchestrated time for everything: arrival time, circle time, play-ground time, snack time, story time—each time period a precious container for stimulation and

creativity. And then there's the blessed rest time—a time to play quietly or take a nap. In some ways, Sabbath is a time for the restoration of the child inside each of us. To take a whole day to notice what God has done for us. To take a break from ceaseless activity, responsibility and manipulation of our environment. To observe and to wonder. To just breathe in God's goodness and *be*.

I remember living in Jerusalem for a summer and finding out about the Jewish hotels with "Sabbath elevators"—six days a week they function as any other elevators, but on the Sabbath day they stop at every floor. No one should have to even push an elevator button on the seventh day, nor should you be in a hurry on the Sabbath! From one perspective, I found it absurd. From another perspective, I found it delightful.

Many of us have read the first part of the famous poem from Ecclesiastes: "*For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven*" (or we've hummed along to "Turn! Turn! Turn!," the old Byrds song based on it), but we haven't realized there's a second part to the poem (vv.13–14) that describes how the rhythms and changes, the sorrows and the pleasures of life, are contained within God's grand symphony of eternity. We are invited to take time to stand—or sit or kneel—in awe.

Share aloud or reflect:

2. Describe the last time you took a full day's worth of rest, recreation and gratitude. Do you have any regular "Sabbath habits"?
3. Given the decline in weekly worship participation in the U.S., how does or could your church community encourage worship and congregational fellowship as part of a positive pattern of rest and reconnection, new perspectives and gratitude?

AN EXERCISE OF FREEDOM

📖 **Read:** Deuteronomy 5:12–15

Share aloud or reflect:

4. What similarities and differences do you notice between the versions of the commandment in Exodus 20 and in Deuteronomy 5?

Both versions of the third commandment make clear that the Sabbath is for everyone, not just a privileged few. Everyone gets a rest, not just the leisure class or the wealthy. Even enslaved people and work animals get a full 24-hour rest not less than once every seven days.

It wasn't always this way for God's people. Back in Egypt, Pharaoh certainly didn't give them every seventh day off from their brick-making duties. The Sabbath is a mark of liberation, of the freedom for which God has delivered the Israelites. They are to partake of the goodness of life through regular rest, and to always, always be mindful that all God's creatures deserve an equal, dignifying share of that rest. It's not a suggestion; it's a command. It's not onerous; it's the cleansing breath of life.

I lived in Hong Kong for several years and got to know some of the hundreds of thousands of women who came from the Philippines and Indonesia to work as domestic helpers in Hong Kong households, many of them earning less than \$600 a month. They were often expected to work from early morning to late night, tending children and the elderly, cleaning, grocery shopping, cooking, walking the dog and cleaning some more. Since they almost always lived with their employers in tiny apartments, there was no getting away from their work, and many looked exhausted, with circles under their eyes. Sundays, however, were a different story. On Sundays, their one government-regulated day off,

you could go to any of the large parks of Hong Kong and hear singing, laughter, music. As you drew closer, you'd see the picnic spreads and sharing of food, and witness clusters of robust, joyful Christian worshippers. Sunday was their liberation day.

Luther's Small Catechism with African Descent Reflections notes, "The Sabbath was the first fair-labor law" (p. 17).

The ELCA Asian contextual commentary also emphasizes the liberating aspect of the Sabbath:

The observance of the Sabbath day as a day of rest is of utmost importance in Asian societies. ... the question is whether the poor people who are dependent on their daily work and wages and the laborers in industries and commerce get their deserved day of rest and find time to worship and praise God for all of God's gifts.

The liberative aspect of Sabbath is not limited to human persons; it includes animals, nature and all of creation. In this regard the observance of Sabbath has ecological significance as well. More than resting, the observance of Sabbath is to redeem the groaning creation and keep the mother earth fertile for future generations. (p. 17)

Share aloud or reflect:

5. Many expect to go shopping, get gas, visit restaurants or have our children play organized sports on any day of the week, including Sunday. How does this impact service workers and their families? Society as a whole? Faith communities?
6. Have you ever looked into the fair labor practices (including regular, predictable days off per week) of the businesses and manufacturers you patronize?
7. What might be some ecological benefits of a Sabbath rest?

JESUS AND THE HABIT OF SABBATH

📖 **Read:** Luke 4:16, Mark 2:23–3:6 and Matthew 22:34–40

There's an old saying, "It's the exception that proves the rule." From reading Luke 4:16, we can see that Jesus honored the Sabbath. He made a weekly habit of gathering with others at the synagogue to read and study the Torah, Psalms and Prophets, worship and give thanks to God. Jesus undoubtedly learned the practice of Sabbath from his Jewish parents: to refrain from work, enjoy the company of the community and take it easy once every seven days! We might imagine the child Jesus jumping out of bed with joy on a Saturday morning in Nazareth, the Jewish Sabbath having begun at dusk the night before. No sounds of hammers or saws today. No need to help with chores since all essentials had been prepared the day before! If God the Father rested on the seventh day and marked it as special, why wouldn't God the Son?

Yet according to all four Gospels, the young adult Jesus gets into hot water regarding the Sabbath. It seems the religious authorities had turned a gracious, spacious understanding of the Sabbath into a legalistic power struggle. Anyone who has worked in a bureaucracy or in the legal system can relate to the way in which a narrow interpretation of a rule becomes more important than either common sense or the call to make a compassionate exception. Jesus taught—and lived out—a clear interpretive hierarchy among the commandments. The commands by which all other rules are to be judged? Love God and love your neighbor.

As a teen, I worked as a grocery store cashier in Rockford, Illinois. The store was open from 7 a.m. to 9 p.m. At 8:50 p.m., all the workers started eyeing the doors. At 9 p.m. sharp, our manager, Bruce, would lock the doors and we would breathe a collective sigh of relief. Quitting time! But every so

often, a harried customer would come running up and frantically knock on the door. This might be an elderly man who had come back for just one forgotten item...or a mom who was desperate for a pack of diapers. Some of us (no need to mention names) would quietly mutter, "Hey, nine o'clock is quitting time, buster," when Bruce sometimes decided to let the person in to buy that one last necessity. "You gotta have a heart in this business," he would say. "Otherwise, it's the business that runs you."

Share aloud or reflect:

8. Can you think of a time when you saw compassionate exceptions prove a rule?

HONOR YOUR FOLKS

📖 **Read:** Exodus 20:12 and Luke 2:33–35, 41–51

Parenting is full of joys and suffering. Perhaps one reason God commands us to honor our father and mother is because of their sacrifices and suffering. Both Joseph and Mary suffer the community-imposed shame of a pre-wedding pregnancy. They suffer the trip to Bethlehem, where Mary gave birth. (Actual birth-giving always involves suffering, of course, even if angels are hovering!) When Mary and Joseph bring baby Jesus to the temple for the first time, they experience the joy of receiving blessings from an old grandmother in the faith (Anna) and grandfather in the faith (Simeon). But then Simeon makes that little aside to Mary: "*...and a sword will pierce your own soul too.*"

Roman Catholics consider Simeon's prophecy the first of the "Seven Sorrows of Mary." The flight into Egypt, where Mary and Joseph went as refugees with Jesus because of Herod's vicious murder of Jewish babies, is the Second Sorrow. The Third Sorrow is a version of every parent's nightmare—the

missing child! And yet, when Mary and Joseph finally find their 12-year-old son, after three full days of God alone knows how much anxiety, Jesus doesn't seem to fully appreciate his parents' concern. Only at the end of the story, as they return to Nazareth, does Luke's Gospel take pains to reassure us that Jesus "*was obedient to them.*"

📖 **Read:** Mark 3:19b–21 and 3:31–35

I always think this encounter should be numbered among Mary's sorrows too, although Roman Catholic tradition does not include it. Jesus is starting to come into his own. He's been baptized. He's overcome temptation. He's called his first disciples. He's healed many, and he's been preaching and drawing massive crowds. And now, in his hometown, people think he's gone mad. His mother and brothers come to restrain him, and Jesus uses it as an opportunity to redefine the family.

Share aloud or reflect:

9. In what ways did your parents suffer because of you (for example, during pregnancy and birth, or during your childhood or young adulthood)?
10. How do these two stories of Jesus in the temple and the familial attempt to restrain Jesus help us to interpret and put limits on the fourth commandment?
11. How do you think Mary might have felt about Jesus' redefinition of mother and family? Is Jesus keeping the fourth commandment?

HONOR THE AGED

📖 **Read:** Matthew 15:1–7a, 19:16–19 and 1 Timothy 5:8

Jesus teaches that the fourth commandment is an ongoing and essential component of gospel life. He condemns the hypocritical Pharisees who think giving to religious causes somehow exempts them from supporting their own parents. A generation later, St. Paul writes to Timothy that "*whoever does not provide... for family members, has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.*" Strong words! Today, this commandment also calls us to honor and care for all the elderly in our community. In this regard, we can learn from the global church and diverse cultures. For example, Asian Descent Lutherans have offered this interpretation of the fourth commandment: "Virtues of respect for parents including elders and ancestors are prevalent in almost all Asian cultures. ... One can also positively imagine and claim that the blessing of long life attached in honoring parents may be due to such practices" (*Luther's Small Catechism: An Exposition of the Christian Faith in Asian Contexts and Cultures*, p.22) I can attest to the increasing honor I was shown as my hair turned gray during the years I lived in Hong Kong, which has one of the longest life expectancies in the world! Now that I am back in the U.S., I miss that gentle societal reverence for the elderly.

I'll also never forget the year our congregation in Ames, Iowa, hosted guests from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania. Paula, one of our church partners, marveled at the stately university buildings and the gleaming hospital. Then we took her to see a rather nice (and pricey) private nursing home. Paula was quiet, then on the way back to the car, she spoke: "You mean people don't take care of their own mothers and fathers who gave them life? The elderly people have to live all together like this,

and have strangers cook for them? And where are their grandchildren? They don't see them all day long?"

"Thank you for showing this to me," she said. "We do not have poverty like this in Tanzania."

Now, I will hasten to say that I thank God for good elder-care facilities and nursing homes. I look back with gratitude on the attentive, skilled staff who cared for my mother in the last years of her life. Yet Paula's perspective, as a woman of God from a different culture, stays with me.

Share aloud or reflect:

12. How does your congregation remember, honor and care for both active elders and the more fragile or potentially isolated elderly?

EVEN THE DIFFICULT ONES

📖 **Read:** Matthew 7:1–5 and 18:21–22

Let's admit it: Throughout human history, there have been no perfect parents. Adam and Eve? Alas, no. Abraham and Sarah? Definitely not. How about Jacob, Leah or Rebecca? Surely you jest! I once offered a program on mothers and fathers of the Bible. It turns out biblical parenthood is a thing, but not necessarily a good thing! Not even Mary and Joseph were perfect. They were probably better than average—definitely better than my spouse and me—but perfect? No one is perfect except God.

Does God really expect grown children to forgive and forget? "Do not judge, lest you be judged," Christ says. Yet it is important to acknowledge the scars for what they are. All parents have faults, and some terribly, terrifyingly so. Evil exists.

In William Faulkner's short story "Barn Burning," a young boy has a father who is a pyromaniac. The dad routinely gets temporary farming jobs, soon argues with the boss family, then burns

down a building before escaping with his own little family in the night. This cycle repeats itself until one day, it becomes too much for the youngest son, and he runs to warn the new boss of the impending fire. He has to disobey his pyromaniac father in order to obey God. He honors his father most in that moment by disobeying him. And then he further keeps the heavenly Father's commandment by having compassion on his earthly dad.

Share aloud or reflect:

13. Think of times when it's been easy for you to honor parents, parental figures or elders in your life. Have there been times this has been difficult or near impossible? What resources do the Scriptures, your faith or your church offer?

CLOSING HYMN

"Now Thank We All Our God" (*ELW* 840, verses 1 and 3)

CLOSING PRAYER

Thank you, O God, for loving us enough to rekindle us with your word. Thank you for reviving in us a thirst for your Sabbath and a renewed hunger to honor parents, teachers and the aged in our church and community. By your Holy Spirit, give us a sense of confidence and integrity as we go forth from this study, so we may gladly and confidently love and serve you and our neighbor. In Christ's name we pray. Amen. 🌿

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Session two

Rhythms and respect

BY CHRISTA VON ZYCHLIN

OVERVIEW

One traditional understanding of the Ten Commandments has been the “two tablets” approach. The first set (the first 3 or 4 commands, depending on how you count them) have to do with worshipping and loving God. The second set (commandments 4 through 10) have to do with serving and loving the neighbor.

In this second Bible study session, we’ll consider the “hinge commandments”—rules that work both ways, helping us to love and serve God and the neighbor. Keeping the Sabbath well will encourage us to worship God regularly and to enjoy the company of family and friends at least one day a week, without the compulsion to always be “doing” something. Honoring our parents well allows us to also honor God, who first gave life to our ancestors. We’ll also review Jesus’ teaching of the “greatest commandment,” reminding us that all the commandments function in both directions, encouraging us to return God’s all-encompassing love, and direct practical love toward our neighbor.

OPTIONAL ACTIVITIES

1. Ask group members to share a “show & tell” object related to the session theme. Photos of this activity can be fun to share in your newsletter or social media. Try one of these prompts:

- Bring a picture that shows you or someone you love in utter relaxation.
 - Share a picture or an object that represents your most relaxing moment in the last seven days.
 - Bring old family photos of your grandparents or ancestors.
 - Bring a photo of the youngest and oldest members of your extended family.
2. Substitute one of the following YouTube videos of Ecclesiastes 3 in place of the reading in the first section of this session:
- *A Time for Everything: Ecclesiastes 3*, by Alabaster Co., offers a reading with a compilation of photos. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JrpE0uIVpLo>.
 - *Turn! Turn! Turn! Ecclesiastes 3:1-15 MV* features the old folk song performed by the Byrds. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WB6jhbtDUZE>
 - *Ateneo Chamber Singers - Ecclesiastes 3:1-8* is a choral interpretation by Von De Guzman. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dW1KPgKqcvE>
3. If this study is part of a longer retreat (or if your congregation is looking for an adult education class to offer), consider asking a local rabbi or Jewish friend or neighbor to come and share about the meaning and practice of the Sabbath.

OTHER SUGGESTIONS

1. You can also point participants to Luther’s Small Catechism, including the Ten Commandments, in the *ELW*, p. 1160.
2. When discussing the Third Commandment, you may want to say a word about Luther’s explanation of the third commandment in the Large Catechism. Speaking in offensive generalities about “the Jews,” Luther misrepresented the Jewish practice of Sabbath-keeping as something trivial and arbitrary. In fact, keeping the Sabbath is a treasured practice upheld in both Old and

New Testaments and honored by Jesus himself. Furthermore, in this pastor's opinion, Luther emphasizes "going to church and listening to the preacher" on Sundays, at the expense of reminding us of something contemporary society so deeply needs: true rest and refreshment. I often like to say that we are Lutheran because like Luther we love the Bible and find freedom in the Gospel, not because we slavishly follow, defend or agree with everything Martin Luther once said.

SHORT STUDY (30 minutes)

1. **Introduction** – Skip reading the introduction and go directly to skimming the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20:1-17. Discuss Question 1 (Q1).
2. **A rhythm of rest** – Read only the first four verses of Ecclesiastes 3. Discuss Q2. (Skip Q3.)
3. **An exercise of freedom** – Read the Deuteronomy text. (Skip all Q's 4,5,6,7.)
4. **Jesus and the habit of Sabbath** – Do the whole section including Q8.
5. **Honor your folks** – (Skip entire section; skip Q9,Q10, Q11.)
6. **Honor the aged** – Do the whole section including Q12.
7. **Even the difficult ones** – Only read the scripture texts from Matthew. (Skip the study text, and go right to Q13.)
8. **Closing encouragement** – Read this section. If you have time, end with verses 1 & 3 of "Now Thank We All Our God." This classic hymn incorporates honor of our mothers with honor of God our "Father."

A LITTLE LONGER (45-60 minutes)

As above, but add the opening hymn. Add Qs. 5, 7 & 8 back in. Also add Even the difficult ones, and spend a little longer on discussion questions.

CLOSING ENCOURAGEMENT

Here are some encouraging words leaders can offer participants as they close the session, if they wish:

God's commandments challenge us! So far, we've dug into just a few of the many Scripture passages that can speak to us regarding these two commandments, and we have only mentioned a few of the contemporary challenges to keeping the Sabbath and honoring parents. As we close today, we can draw comfort from Martin Luther's Preface to the Large Catechism:

I implore [those know-it-alls] not ever to imagine that they have learned these parts of the catechism perfectly, or that they know them sufficiently, even though they think they know them ever so well. Even if their knowledge of the catechism were perfect (although that is impossible in this life), it is still highly advantageous and fruitful to read it daily and practice it in reflection and conversation. Namely, through such reading, discussion and reflection, the Holy Spirit is present and bestows ever new and greater light and devotion, so that it tastes better and better and is digested, as Christ also promises in Matthew 18[:20], "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." (The Large Catechism of Dr. Martin Luther 1529, p. 292) 🌿