I tend not to be much of a conspiracist except when it comes to the lectionary – I admit it’s a very niche band on the conspiracy spectrum, but you go with what works. As you may know our Sunday readings come from the Revised Common Lectionary, Track 2. And as exciting as that may be, it gets even more exciting. The Revised Common Lectionary, Track 2 readings are similar to, but not exactly the same as, the original Common Lectionary located in the back of the 1979 Prayer Book (the prayer book in your pew). This lectionary was developed by the Roman Catholic Church shortly after the second Vatican Council in 1965. As I said what we follow is not quite the same as that lectionary because sometimes there are rather odd modifications. And today contains just one such modification. In the lectionary found in the Prayer Book the reading from the Old Testament for today is Isaiah 56: 1-7 with verses 2-5 being optional. In our current lectionary the reading is Isaiah 56:1,6-8 with no option of picking up verses 2-5. This of course got me wondering why those who revised the Lectionary were so concerned about what you and I might read in those verses that they had them completely removed. So, I decided to stick it to the man and read through them. After doing so I can’t quite figure out what was so spicy about them that compelled the lectionary putter-togetherers to remove them besides the fact that they mention eunuchs a couple of times. At least I hope it is simply a case of eunuch discrimination, because the other theme that runs through those verses is the idea of keeping the sabbath holy. For example, in verse 2 we hear, “Blessed is the man who … keeps the sabbath, not profaning it, and keeps his hand from doing any evil.” And then in verses four and five we kind of combine the eunuch and sabbath themes and hear, “To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths…I will give them an everlasting name which shall not be cut off.” I will leave it to you to decide the motivations of those who removed this text from today’s readings because I want to focus on this idea of keeping the Sabbath.

If you remember the opening it tells us to “Keep justice, and do righteousness.” The text then, with the missing verses reinserted, says the man who does this and also keeps the sabbath will be blessed. Isaiah sees being just and righteous as important but does not see that as sufficient to be blessed by God. For that we need to also keep the Sabbath. That probably sounds very odd to us today because keeping the Sabbath is seen as optional at best. But it is worth asking why, when God gives a list of activities in which we should be engaged, those activities are a combination of things that are both inwardly and outwardly focused. We are to do justice and actions that are right, but we are also to take time off for ourselves and to be with God. And it is interesting to me that of all the thou shalt and thou shalt nots listed in the Ten Commandments the commandment which is probably most regularly violated is the one that tells us to take some time off, to rest and find refreshment. We are much better about not coveting our neighbor’s livestock than we are about setting aside one day of the week for rest.

The great Russian author Leo Tolstoy said, “People try to do all sorts of clever and difficult things to improve life instead of doing the simplest, easiest thing-refusing to participate in activities that make life bad.” I think that Tolstoy’s observation might have some relevance to this keeping of the sabbath discussion we stumbled on today. But before I proceed let me offer a slight caveat. I am not saying that if we start observing the Sabbath all our problems and society’s problems will disappear, but what I do think is that it could help. So, let’s talk for a minute about intentionally taking a day off and about why God is so interested in us doing so.

There is a joke about an old Scotsman who was being asked to work on the Sabbath. The man trying to persuade him says, “You know Jesus picked the heads of wheat on the Sabbath” to which the old Scotsman replied “Aye, and I’ve been suspicious of him ever since.” I think this joke may present some of our apprehension about the Sabbath, we think of it as a lot of rules about what may or may not be done. And I am not sure we need to be quite that strict, we are Episcopalian after all, but I think we could probably do a better job than we currently are doing. Based on your age you might consider me old, middle aged or relatively young. Whatever the case I do know that Sundays looked much different when I was a child. No, we did not live like Orthodox Jews but there was something different about Sundays – a lot of things were closed and very few activities were planned. In addition, what we now call a landline was really the only way someone could get in touch with you and for that to even work you had to physically be at home. I can still remember my dad’s boss calling him one weekend. The reason I remember it is because it was so atypical. The weekend was the weekend. When you went home from work on Friday night, unless there were some very unique circumstances, work did not commence again until Monday morning. Now days people contact us constantly and weekends are often busier than weekdays. And I am not sure that things are better than they were. While I realize correlation does not equal causation consider this for a moment. The iPhone was launched on June 29, 2007 making it so we never had to take a break from electronic communication in whatever form. Now consider this: Anxiety in American society increased from 5.12% in 2008 to 6.68% in 2018 among adults. Stratifying by age revealed the most notable increase was from 7.97% to 14.66% which was found in respondents 18–25 years old. Something has happened and it seems like we try a lot of what Tolstoy calls, “clever and difficult things” to make our lives more pleasant, but I am not sure that it is working. Maybe it might be time to try something simple and easy. Maybe this is why God puts taking a sabbath up there with maintaining justice and doing what is right.

I tend to be remarkably uncool and untrendy but there is a term out there that I think the young kids use which may partly explain our current state of anxiety and dislike of the concept of keeping the sabbath. The term is *fomo* and it stands for fear of missing out. The definition I found on the internet was, “anxiety that an exciting or interesting event may currently be happening elsewhere, often aroused by posts seen on social media.” We seem to have gotten ourselves into a terrible bind where we will not rest because we are afraid that by resting, we may miss some exciting and wonderful event. We feel that taking a Sabbath is not an option because may miss out. The problem is that we are made in the image of God and God rested on the seventh day so we cannot escape the need for a Sabbath. But it seems that rather than doing the simplest and easiest thing that Tolstoy discusses we try to find an activity that will mask the symptoms. We are filled with anxiety and yet refuse to take the cure. Recall what Jesus says in Matthew’s Gospel. “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” Notice Jesus does not promise one more activity but rather a lack of activity. Taking a day off is not a sin. In fact, from what we hear from Isaiah not taking a day might be the sin. So, it might be time to do something simple and reclaim the Sabbath, following God’s example so that we may be his own this day and forevermore.