The Chosen: Shabbat S1E2 Memory Verse: Matthew 11:28

September 17th, 2023 Scripture Reading: Exodus 20:1-17

**SLIDE 1: TITLE**

 Today we continue into episode two of this miniseries entitled “The Chosen”. Last week we followed a storyline that showed the desperation and fear of a woman who went by the name Lilith, meaning “of the night” or “demon”. We came to find a certain stranger knew that her real name was Mary of Magdala and by his hand she was healed of this demon possession. We saw Nicodemus, a man of religious authority, stand before Lilith with the intent of helping her, of exorcising the demons that troubled her, but he was unable to help her, claiming that she was “beyond human aid”. We also met Matthrew, a young Jewish man who betrayed his own people by working as a tax collector for the Romans. We are also given some context about the lives of Simon and Andrew, poor Jewish fisherman just trying to keeps their heads above water.

**SLIDE 2: Cast**

 Now today, we go back in time. We see Shabbat being celebrated by God’s people in antiquity. As modern Christians, we need to be little historians. What we believe and the scriptures we profess are all rooted in real history. We should be aware of and look into the historical context of our beliefs and practices. I think the filmmakers do a good job of that here. Shabbat is the ancient practice of the Hebrew people in which there was to be no work done on the Sabbath day. It was a holy day, meaning separated from all the rest. This command was literally set in stone way back on Mt. Sinai. The people had been miraculously delivered from their lot as slaves to the Egyptians. They were brought safely through the Red Sea and now God was revealing to them his law, rules to live by, ways to honor him. And the fourth commandment in the list of ten states, “Remember the Sabbath day and treat it as holy. Six days you may work and do all your tasks, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. Do not do any work on it.”

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That goes for servants and animals as well. So this is not a call to laziness or idleness. People are supposed to work. We are created to be productive. The other six days are filled with hard work, but not this day…the Sabbath is for rest. And then God includes the rationale: “The LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea and everything that is in them in six days, but rested on the seventh day. That is why the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.” This cycle of work and rest has been baked into the very creation. God rested, not because he was so taxed and weary from creating all week, but because he wanted to establish rest as a blessing to his creation. I think we all know that rest is best enjoyed when it comes as relief from hard work. A lazy person does not actually rest, they cannot know how good it is, they have not earned it. It is sort of a principle of life: the harder you work, the sweeter the rest.

**SLIDE 4: FAMILY, PEOPLE, GOD**

 In the film a mother states to her child that they practice Shabbat every week because it honors three things: family, our people and God. 1) Family: because you rest together with the people you live with, the people you love. You take the time to eat with one another, play games together, laugh and enjoy the time. There was no traveling allowed on such a day. You would have been stuck at home with your family – not to tolerate them – but to honor them. 2) Our people: because the Sabbat has been practiced by God’s people since those days in the desert. Just as the day itself is set aside as holy, by living the practice God’s people are set aside as holy as well. And finally, 3) it honors God, who commanded it. W we should obey it for that reason alone, but also because Shabbat points us to the creation and thus the Creator. We rest because when God created, he rested too. It reminds us of who we are and where we came from, our origin. And joining together in that holy rest with God is a blessing that cycles back each and every week. It becomes a normal rhythm of life.

 Throughout the episode we see the Jewish people bustling around getting everything prepared for Shabbat. Invites and food and accommodations all have to be planned out because none of it could be done on the Sabbath itself, and sundown was the deadline. So Nicodemus hosts a fancy Shabbat with fine and expensive plates and cups, while Mary, formally known as Lilith, hosts her first Shabbat by piecing together what little she has. But the hard work it takes to prep is all part of the beauty of rest.

 But taking a day mandatory day off can cut into profits, it will decrease efficiency and productivity. Simon faces this challenge. “If I work on the Sabbath, I can catch more fish each week. I can bring in a great haul while everyone else is resting. It would be prime time to catch up on the bills!” Mathematically speaking, Simon is not wrong here. How many of us think in terms of money and productivity? How many of us have picked up a shift on the weekend in order to boost the bottom line? The film inserts a subplot in which Simon is tempted to turn in his fellow merchant Jews who are fishing illegally. He has made a deal with the Romans: he will serve as their informant and they will give him a pass on tax day. It’s not a biblical account in anyway, but it does illustrate the tension that the Sabbath brings to lives that are busy and overwrought. God gives us the Sabbath for the purpose of resting, yet it stresses us out! We know it is not so easy to take a day off. We know it can be difficult when the pressure is on to pay down that loan or save up for that project. But to rest in God is an act of faith. To not attend the crops for a day, to decide not to go to market, to leave the sheep in the pen, to leave the emails in the inbox, to keep the phone on silent, to leave work at the office and trust that it will all be alright until tomorrow. God calls us to work hard, but at the same time, all we have belongs to him. As James, whom we meet in this episode will eventually write in James 1:17, “Every good and perfect gift comes from above.” Blessings come from God and we can rest trusting that he will continue to take care of us. Resting in God is an act of faith.

**SLIDE 5: James 1:17, “Every good and perfect gift comes from above.”**

 One might think, as I did initially, that this episode really makes a lot of this Sabbath thing. We understand the concept, why does a whole episode need to focus on such an old practice? And then it hit me: That is the whole point. Shabbat was and is an old practice. It’s age is the very thing that makes it valuable. We modern Christians enjoy new fruits from this old seed. We have a weekend cycle in which we take two days off, a leftover blessing – an after effect of this idea of Sabbath. But what do we usually do with those two days? We pack them as full as we can! We travel, we make plans, we spend money, attend to projects around the house, we clean the garage…well, I don’t…we may not work at our jobs but we stay busy. Our weekends are far from restful. In fact, we might even say the words, “I have to take advantage of the weekend,” as though it is something to be negotiated with. God’s invitation remains: just rest. Rest in me, rest in creation. Rest is my long standing gift to you. Honor me by resting.

**SLIDE 6: FLOWER**

And this holy rest is exactly what Mary Magdalene was able to feel as she now lived out her days as a woman with hope and radiant joy. She goes out to smell the flowers. No longer was she plagued by the threat of demons. She was free, she was at rest. And she caught the attention of the Jewish leaders who noticed her marked improvement. Nicodemus, who tried and failed to save Mary from the demons in the previous episode, approaches Mary to find out more information. Now, again, this is not a story found in the Gospels. We do know, from Luke 8:2, that Mary was delivered from seven demons and became a follower of Jesus. We do know that Nicodemus was a pharisee, a teacher of Israel, but we do not know if these two ever met. That said, in this fictitious conversation, some important truths are told.

 When he first sees Mary restored and in her right mind, he is impressed. He knew full well what she was like in the throes of her suffering. He is holding out hope that his efforts to deliver her were actually successful. He implores her for more information saying, “I want to understand how it happened.” She simply does not know. She can only claim one thing: “I was one way and now I am completely different. And the thing that happened in between – was Him.” Mary experienced a conversion, a transformation. She had a salvation experience. And now she was testifying, she was proclaiming that great change that had occurred. “I was one way, and now I am completely different.” That is testimony. Here we have a woman teaching a man who is a great teacher himself. She is telling him about the things of God, proclaiming his great power. It is a fictitious conversation, but it mirrors the conversations that were actually had when, fast forward a few years, women rushed to proclaim to men that they had found a certain tomb to be empty. Testimony. Proclamation. Simply reporting about the things God has done in our lives.

**SLIDE 7: Testimony. Proclamation. Simply reporting about the things God has done in our lives.**

 In the episode, finally the sun sets, and Shabbat arrives. Jewish people, rich and poor, sit down to the same meal shared in the same way. Mary’s house, a small hovel in a rough part of town, has a few guests. Ill-mannered, blind, lame…outcasts. In fact, the one thing they all have in common is the fact that none of them have ever been openly invited to a Shabbat meal before. And somehow Mary’s house is the perfect venue for them. Mary is shy about her ability to host, and we find she made a small error by leaving an extra chair for Elijah. This is only to be done once a year during the Passover which celebrates how God saved his people from Egypt. But she made the mistake and there the chair remains.

 Elijah was a powerful prophet of God in the Old Testament. You can read about him in the book of 1 Kings starting around chapter 17. He was a hero of the faith for sure, the prophet of prophets. Prophets spoke God’s words and declared God’s plans, so leaving a spot for Elijah was a way for the Jews to remain open to hearing about God’s plans. They hoped Elijah, or someone who was a prophet, like Elijah would come and share news that God has sent his long-expected Messiah, the one who would come and save the Jews from the mess they were in. The Messiah would come and defeat Rome in a glorious revolt and re-establish the temple as the dwelling place of God. Victory would come through the Messiah!

 Mary left a chair for Elijah, but who should enter the room? Jesus of Nazareth. Not only an uninvited outcast, but the one who is ultimately rejected; not only a prophet who spoke for God, but the prophet of prophets. Not only one who announced the coming of the Messiah, but none other than the Messiah himself; Jesus of Nazareth.

**SLIDE 8: Jesus of Nazareth**

 We referenced this verse only a few weeks ago when we talked about conversion, but I would love for you to hear these words of Jesus again, from the book of Revelation: “Look! I’m standing at the door knocking. If any hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to be with them, and I will have dinner with them, and they will have dinner with me.” My friends, Elijah is here, the Messiah has come. The wait is over. And just today we have covered the Bible from front to back. God created this word in the beginning and rested after six days so that we, in turn, could not take advantage of weekends and time off, but use that time to rest, to honor our families, our people and God. And I hope you can see how we have covered the entirety of the Bible just today. God’s rest, established in Genesis at the creation, is practiced by God’s people in the form of a meal and during that meal, God comes into our midst with a knock at the door, as in Revelation, wanting to come in and dine with us. If we are not too busy to hear his voice, if we are not too distracted to open up the door, if we are not too ill-prepared to accommodate one more, he will come in and eat with us and we with him. The Messiah, the Savoir, God made known to us, the one who heals us of our demons, the one who sets us free from slavery, the very Creator in whom we can find rest…He is standing at the door. Will you let him in? Will you enter into the long line of the people of God and dine with the Messiah who saves? Come and find rest in him today.

**SLIDE 9: Matthew 11:28. Jesus says, “Come to me all you who are struggling hard and carrying heavy loads and I will give you rest.”**

 Slow down long enough – I think we are all fairly slow at the moment – quiet your mind, quell the nagging demands and hear the invitation of the Messiah. He speaks these words in Matthew 11:28. Jesus says, “Come to me all you who are struggling hard and carrying heavy loads and I will give you rest.”

Amen.