



Sabbath: The Gift of Rest

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Yesterday was Sunday, and I slept in. When I woke, I made crepes for the kids because that is what they most wanted to eat. Then we took the dog on a long, muddy, squirrel-joy walk. A little later we played a board game we'd gotten for Christmas that has been sitting pristine in its wrapper on the shelf untouched, until it was rediscovered in a wandering moment of boredom yesterday. When people dispersed to their own corners, I read a novel I've been working my way through in waiting rooms and for a few tired minutes before falling asleep. But this time, I propped myself with pillows in my bed in the middle of the day, with the sun streaming in, and without deadline, time-killing agenda, or guilt, I read until I felt full and ready to move on to something else.

Yesterday was Sunday and we did not go to church, as has been the case two Sundays a month for the past six years. This is not because we do not have a congregation; actually, I am the pastor. This is not because there were not services happening in our location; in fact, our building was teeming with life, as two other congregations met there for worship. But I was not there, and the members and participants of my congregation were not either. They were passing their day in much the same way I was: slowing down. Noticing. Resisting the urge to rush. Defying the pressure to pour attention into anything obligatory. Breathing. Being. In fact, our board game and park romp are a part of an important discipline, to which we have dedicated ourselves.

Sabbath promises that when we stop and rest, God will remind us whose we are, and help us remember who we are. In bold defiance, Sabbath calls us to regularly step out of the mentality of constant anxiety and relentless productivity, and into God's reality of fearless belonging and satisfied enough.

Lake Nokomis Presbyterian Church practices Sabbath. Two weekends a month, we worship on Sunday morning in all our Presbyterian glory, robed choir, sermon, liturgy, and hymns in a lively communal experience of worship. And the other two weekends, we practice Sabbath. On those Saturday evenings, the doors of the sanctuary open in candlelit silence to a service shaped around experiential prayer stations. With spaciousness and contemplative music, we let God's word from the previous week's Scripture and sermon sink into us in a more personal and specific ways. And then we go home, and we don't come back on Sunday.

We take Sunday as Sabbath. We spend a day intentionally *being*, instead of thoughtlessly *doing*. We notice what we are needing, the pulls within, and we listen to them. We resist the raucous appeals around us—the screens, noise, demands, and obligations—in order to be fully present to God, ourselves, and those we love. Theoretically, that is. Sometimes we just spend the day in a restless form of withdrawal from activity, or in a knock-down, drag-out battle with things we tell ourselves we *should* be doing. But even that, like hunger pangs in a dedicated fast, becomes a form of prayer. The struggle is a gift of self-awareness and recognition of how badly we need the stop, and the deep longing we are seeking to meet with this practice.

BECOMING HUMAN “DOINGS”

The practice of Sabbath is not new. It has been woven into God's way of relating with God's people from the very beginning—the exodus, creation; God's life-giving rhythm of work and rest is part of the fabric of it all. But we've largely lost this pause, this gift that revives awareness of our own humanity and God's providence and presence. The Jewish people have allowed this practice to continue to shape their identity as God's people in defiance of a world that increasingly demands alert attention, activity, and anxiety 24/7/365. And practicing Sabbath used to be an important part of the Christian life as well. Early Christians observed the arrival of Sabbath with the setting sun on Friday nights, existed in Sabbath time on Saturdays, and gathered for worship Sunday mornings as the Lord's Day finale to the whole affair. Every week.

But practices erode and culture encroaches, and human beings reach beyond our own limits and limitations, and our relationship with time has become tenuous. Electric lights mean cities never sleep; cars, planes, and Wi-Fi mean we can be anywhere besides right here in no time at all (or at the same time); and ever-multiplying choices and opportunities mean that traveling soccer and sprawling shopping malls compete for our ever-diminishing “free time.” When homework and housework lie waiting and our to-do lists and in-boxes far outpace our human capacity or waking hours, we no longer know how *not* to do. Far from stopping on Sundays, many of us find our Sundays to be the busiest days of the week, and we look forward to the, if not slower pace, then at least predictable order that Monday morning brings.

Theologian Jürgen Moltmann, in his commentary on the contemporary “distress of time,” describes the modern person as “homo accelerandus”:

He [*sic*] has a great many encounters, but does not really experience anything, since although he wants to see everything, he internalizes nothing and reflects upon nothing. He has a great many contacts but no relationships, since he is unable to linger because he is always “in a hurry.” He devours “fast food,” preferably while standing, because he is no longer able to enjoy anything; after all, a person needs time for enjoyment, and time is precisely what he does not have.¹

We live in a state of constant anxiety and relentless productivity. There is no rest, and little tolerance for the need for it. We’ve all but lost the concept of rest as part of life, as necessary to thriving and surviving (unless it is to further increase our efficiency and productivity). Generally, we stop only when we simply can’t keep going any longer. Rest must be *earned*, vacation hours saved up, and then don’t do too much of it at once. We see rest as weak. Resting is lazy or unmotivated; slackers and freeloaders rest a lot. Also sick people, old people, and infants. So unless we are babies, very old, sick, or slackers, we feel guilty and uncomfortable resting.

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Conversely, we’re really *good* at doing. We *do* all the time, without ceasing. We do more than one thing at a time to “save time”; we pay bills and watch TV and eat dinner simultaneously. *Doing* is what we know. And the more we get done in the day the better we feel about ourselves. So we measure our worth—and others do too—by how much we get accomplished, how much we earn, or produce, or consume, or contribute, how successful we are in the eyes of world. So woe to you if you get mono or cancer or have a nervous breakdown or break your legs, and you find yourself forced to rest, unable to do, for who are you now? What is your life worth now? (But also, secretly, congratulations to you too. We all might feel a tad bit jealous, though we’d never admit it, because as terrible as illness is, you’ve finally earned societal permission to rest.) This endless drive and constant doing is irresistible and overwhelming. Australian theologian and pastor Simon Holt says, “Prolonged busyness is a state of violence...an unwarranted, unjust state destructive to the human soul, the community, and even the earth itself.” He continues,

As human beings function in such a state for a prolonged period, it becomes habit, instinctive, the most comfortable and preferred state. Addicted to our own adrenalin, we favor news bites to thoughtful analysis, newspapers to journals, powernaps to prolonged sleep, microwaves to cooking pots, “now” to “later.” We’ve become impatient with those who want to “dwell” on the past,

¹Jürgen Moltmann, Nicholas Wolterstorff, and Ellen T. Charry, *A Passion for God’s Reign: Theology, Christian Learning and the Christian Self* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 39.

dismissive of those who critique the status quo, and exhausted by those who challenge us to think proactively about the future. We simply don't have time.²

Confronting our most deeply held unconscious convictions and overt communal practices, it turns out that, in fact, resting is not just a good idea saved for those who earn it, can afford it, or can't help it. It is fundamental to the very fabric of our existence and our connection to God and each other as human beings. Though we tend to gloss over it quickly or explain it away, the instruction to rest is the longest and most detailed of the "Ten Words," aka, Ten Commandments, the description of life with God in charge. Why? Why would Sabbath rest be so important as to be held up alongside not murdering or stealing, as guiding principles for the people of God to live by?

THE SABBATH COMMANDMENT

Imagine you are a people enslaved for generations, never in conscious memory having been free, and then suddenly you are. Free. Completely, unequivocally. And you've no idea how to *be* free, because you've never been free. You've been defined as slaves for as long as you can remember. You've never not had other people dictate your worth, structure your life, and tell you how to spend your hours, days, and years. You've been driven by the demand for more from you, and more and more, in a society completely structured around endless, anxious production. And then suddenly, you are delivered from this when the God of Israel brings you out of Egypt. So how do you now be free? How will your lives be structured, and what will they look like?

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Thankfully, God gives you some instruction. The God who delivered you out of slavery, who created you and claims you, now tells you with Ten Words what a free people lives like, how life works best, and what allows human beings to be most fully who God intended them to be all along. God starts by giving a few words—commandments really—on how to relate to God as free and whole people. Then God ends the list with some obvious directions about how to relate to each other as human beings. But right in the middle, between these two movements—relating to God and relating to each other—is this hinge point:

Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. For six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female

²Simon Carey Holt, "Slow Time in a Fast World: A Spirituality of Rest," in *Ministry, Society and Theology*, 16/2 (December 2002) 11.

slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it. (Exod 20:8–11)

And it turns out to be the key to the whole thing. It could be said that the other nine commandments take the people out of slavery, but the Sabbath commandment takes the slavery out of the people.

SABBATH REMINDS US WHO WE ARE: WE REST BECAUSE GOD RESTS

This God who delivered you from slavery to freedom looked on God's creation and called it good, and then rested and enjoyed what God had made. Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann says,

God rested on the seventh day. God did not show up to do more. God absented God's self from the office. God did not come in and check on creation in anxiety to be sure it was all working. God has complete confidence in the fruit-bearing, blessing-generating processes of creation that have been instituted. God exhibits no anxiety about the life-giving capacity of creation. God knows the world will hold, the plants will perform, and the birds and fish and the beasts of the field will prosper. Humankind will govern the earth in a generative way. All will be well, and all manner of things will be well!³

God is God and you are not, Sabbath says. And neither is any one of the thousand other things that would seek to dominate your life, clog up your mind, soak up your attention, and eat up your time. Outside forces can't dictate the terms of your existence. Only God can. And God is not an endless production, constant anxiety God! God has no problem publicly displaying how non-anxious God is: God rests. You too shall rest.

Historian Dorothy Bass says it this way,

God rests, and blesses this day, and makes it holy. In this way, the Christian theologian Karl Barth has suggested, God declares as fully as possible just how very good creation is. Resting, God takes pleasure in what has been made; God has no regrets, no need to go on to create a still better world or a creature more wonderful than the man and woman. In the day of rest, God's free love toward humanity takes form as time shared with them.⁴

Resting restores us to our humanity and God's sovereignty. Sabbath empowers us to relate well with God and God's world. Sabbath returns us to God's care. And that rest itself is part of creation's cycle. It is part of how God created everything to function.

So, in the first telling of the Ten Commandments, the Sabbath command says essentially this: You rest, because God rests, and you are made in God's image. A

³Walter Brueggemann, *Sabbath as Resistance: Saying NO to the Culture of Now* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2014) 29.

⁴Dorothy C. Bass, ed., *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for Searching People* (San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons, 2010) 78.

beloved child of God, that is who you are. Observe the Sabbath and you will recognize this reality once again.

The first of the two Shabbat candles in the Jewish ritual is lit for this Sabbath command—*Remember the Sabbath*... God rested so you rest. In our community, when we gather to for our Saturday Evening Prayer service that inaugurates Sabbath time, we light two candles as well. This one we call the *WHO* candle, because Sabbath reminds us who we are and who God is.

SABBATH REMINDS US WHOSE WE ARE: WE BELONG TO GOD AND NOT TO PHARAOH

The second place the Sabbath commandment comes up is after the children of Israel have wandered for a generation in the desert, learning, perhaps, how to trust and depend on God, absorbing who they are as God's children. Now they are standing on the threshold of the promised land, and once again they are given the Ten Commandments. The other nine commandments remain unchanged, but this time the Sabbath command is different:

Observe the Sabbath day and keep it holy, as the LORD your God commanded you. For six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work—you, or your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock, or the resident alien in your towns, so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you. Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day. (Deut 5:12–15)

You have been delivered out of slavery into freedom. Do not forget this. Sabbath refuses to let us be defined by a lifestyle of anxious production, our worth determined by what we contribute, the terms of our life dictated by outside forces. You are more than what you buy or sell, consume, produce, or purchase, Sabbath says; you are free.

Sabbath freedom demands a reorientation to our relationships with others. “Rest as did the creator God! And while you rest, be sure that your neighbors rest alongside you. Indeed, sponsor a *system of rest* that contradicts the *system of anxiety* of Pharaoh, because you are no longer subject to Pharaoh's anxiety system.”⁵

The people on the edge of the promised land, who were removed from the ruthless slavery of Pharaoh and are slowly adapting to the gracious rule of God, are now invited to turn this freedom outward, to share its blessing. As they prepare to take up their agency and influence in creating a society with all the temptations of accumulation, coercion, and competition, they must hear this Sabbath command again in a new light.

⁵Brueggemann, *Sabbath as Resistance*, 30.

Because Sabbath is when everybody rests, nobody is ahead of anyone else. Divisions between poor and rich, ruler and slave, weak and strong, healthy and sick, old and young disappear. We are equal in our identity as God's beloved children. The drive to compare, consume, produce, and protect is no longer allowed to dictate our identity or the way we treat one another. As free people, we are to free others as well, because we belong to God who sets us free.

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With the Sabbath command prominently anchoring the Ten Commandments, "the odd insistence of the God of Sinai is that anxious productivity is to be countered by committed neighborliness. The latter practice does not produce so much, but it creates an environment of security and respect and dignity that redefines the human project."⁶

So, in the second telling of the Ten Commandments, the Sabbath command says essentially this: You rest, because you belong to the God who set you free. Remember the Sabbath and you will remember your freedom and that of others.

The second Shabbat candle is lit for this commandment: Observe the Sabbath. In our community we light a second candle for *WHOSE*, because Sabbath reminds us whose we are. We belong not to the gods that enslave in endless busyness, anxious production, and fierce, dehumanizing competition, but to the God of abundance, freedom, justice, and rest.

RECLAIMED BY REST

"YHWH is a Sabbath-keeping God, which fact ensures that restfulness and not restlessness is at the center of life. . . . Sabbath becomes a decisive, concrete, visible way of opting for and aligning with the God of rest."⁷ Rest is not a reward for a job well done or an admission of defeat. It is the base of our existence, the beginning of our being. The Jewish Sabbath day begins not with the rising sun but with its setting. When the sun reaches the horizon, what's done is done, what is not done is not done, and it doesn't matter. Sabbath begins. Everything we do then comes first from our resting being. We sleep, we awaken, we move into our day and our work with our being recreated in rest.

PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE

On a second or fourth Sunday you will find, here and there, all over the city, individuals and families of our congregation purposely *stopping*. The guidelines we give ourselves are to try to do nothing from obligation, to pay attention to the struggle to stop and offer even that as a gift of gratitude, to get outside some, to

⁶Ibid., 28.

⁷Ibid., 10.

play some, to do something that gives us delight. To be with others if we're alone a lot. To be alone if our lives are crowded. To make the day different than our ordinary days. We try to pay attention to what our souls need. And we rest.

My family sits down as the day begins with a piece of paper and each one of us answers two questions. The first one is "What will I say No to today, to remember that I am free?" and then "What will I say Yes to today, to remember who and whose I am?" We might decide to say No to screens, or playdates, or worrying about the week ahead.

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breath, time seems to stretch out and welcome us in*

And we might decide to embrace creativity with an art project, or take a nap, or, as my daughter often does, simply say yes to "being fabulous." Others of our congregation may have other ways of being intentional about their Sabbath practice—lighting a candle, putting ingredients in a slow cooker the night before, turning off their phone, spending time in meditation, reading a poem or text to focus their day.

The No of Sabbath time is for stopping whatever ordinarily keeps you captive—work, worry, anxiety, unfinished projects, the ever present "to do" list, mindless distractions and relentless multitasking, guilt and pressure to be more or do better. Stopping all that. Putting it down for a while. Just being a person. Remembering who you are through rest.

And the Yes of Sabbath time is for space and spaciousness, slowed down and opened up. Gentleness with yourself. Noticing God's presence in the world. *Seeing* these people you love right in front of your face who are usually mostly blocking your path while you're busy doing. Being a person with them. Remembering whose you are in rest.

HARD BUT WORTH IT

One of the things we regularly notice, as we are keeping Sabbath around my house and in our congregation, is how challenging it is. You'd think that telling people to put things down and rest would sound like good news. And it does *sound* like good news. But it is so not easy to do. We are so addicted to doing, and the messages of our worth being tied up with our productivity are so deeply ingrained, that we've all forgotten how to just be a person.

So, we need help not doing. We need other people who are not doing with us, and who will check in and see how our not doing is going. We need some help taking the step into rest, and then staying there, not crawling out to go do something when the urge arises—which happens approximately every forty seconds at first. And we need compassion for ourselves when we discover we're somehow back in

anxiety or busyness without meaning to be, and the courage to gently invite ourselves back into rest.

But while it is unexpectedly difficult to keep to our commitment to not do for that day, we have found that when we really do our not doing, something wonderful happens. When we really allow ourselves to stop and take a proper breath, time seems to stretch out and welcome us in. Sabbath Sundays always feel hours longer than other days to me. Perhaps this is because in them we are suddenly awake to our lives and the world, and the space we hold open fills up with gratitude. We remember a bit, here and there, what a gift it is to be alive, and we discover again, throughout the day, that God meets us in ordinary and extraordinary ways. I am not exaggerating when I say this. It happens.

A WAY BACK TO OUR CENTER

Sabbath time can be a revolutionary challenge to the violence of overwork, mindless accumulation, and endless multiplication of desires, responsibilities, and accomplishments. Sabbath is a way of being in time where we remember who we are, remember what we know, and taste the gifts of spirit and eternity. Like a path through a forest, Sabbath creates a marker for ourselves, so, if we are lost, we can find our way back to our center.⁸

Sabbath promises that when we stop and rest, God will remind us whose we are, and help us remember who we are. There are more ways to let Sabbath begin transforming people, families, and communities than the way we have chosen. Our pattern is what works for us at the moment. But the invitation and the promise of Sabbath remains for us all, however we choose to embrace it. In bold defiance, Sabbath calls us regularly to step out of the mentality of constant anxiety and relentless productivity, and into God's reality of fearless belonging and satisfied enough. Sabbath restores us to our humanity as children of God, alongside other children of God, made in the image of a God who rests. ⊕

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⁸Wayne Muller, *Sabbath: Finding Rest, Renewal, and Delight in Our Busy Lives* (New York: Bantam Books, 2000) 6.