

Sabbath Time
Deuteronomy 5:12-16; Mark 2:23-3:6
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When I was growing up in Birmingham, Alabama, pastors never took (or were offered) sabbaticals. When I was ordained in 1984, sabbaticals were still the domain of Ph.D.'s who wore the black robe of the academy, not the black robe of the parish. Somewhere in the early 1990's, a few churches began to offer their pastors a sabbatical leave after they had served the church for a period of time...often seven years, as a way to reward—or entice—pastors who'd stick around for a long time. Or maybe sabbaticals increased in direct proportion to the darkening circles under the eyes and the deepening worry lines in the brow of church pastors. In any event, sabbaticals for parish ministers are becoming more and more common, at least in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), as we try to retain clergy and encourage their excellence in ministry! We will pray for Jill during the Sabbath time she has entered.

But I suspect it is not only the pastor in the pulpit who needs Sabbath time. In the last ten years, people in the pews have expressed a renewed interest this topic, too. Books and articles on the subject have proliferated. Dark circles and furrowed brows afflict many of us busy and stressed out people. Our interest in Sabbath, of course, should not be surprising—for we are made in the image of the God who (in the beginning) created and blessed and, yes, *needed* Sabbath rest, too. Exodus 31:17 says that on the seventh day, after creating a whole world, God rested and was *refreshed*. Walter Brueggemann points out that the Hebrew word used there is *nephesh*. *Nephesh* is most often a noun meaning “self” or “soul.” In relationship to Sabbath, it becomes a verb! God rested on the Sabbath and was refreshed, re-*nepheshed*. God recovered God's true and glad *self*. You and I need what God needs...in the midst of the hard work of being human, we also need Sabbath rest. We need to be re-*nepheshed*...refreshed...restored to our true and glad selves.ⁱ

But Sabbath time can be hard to find, or claim, in our world today. We live in a fast-paced, demanding culture. And just now we are in a time of increased stress and worry over the economy, our jobs, and basics like mortgages and groceries.

Garret Keizer is a lay Episcopal priest who gave me an interesting insight about how and what defines, even controls, our sense of time these days. As the minister of a small church in Island Pond, Vermont, he has an unusual pastoral responsibility. He is the clock-winder for the town. Keizer writes that twice a week on Tuesdays and Sundays, he climbs up, up, up through a vertical tunnel in the Gothic spire of his church. He arrives at a little wooden house that holds the clockworks in the church tower. With a kind of antique car crank, he winds two enormous drums to get the four clock faces keeping time and for the bell to chime the hours. Keizer says that this weekly activity made him begin to notice clocks, clocks, clocks everywhere. He noticed the number of clocks on town halls and churches that didn't run at all or ran wrong. Then, he says, he noticed that the public keeping of time had passed from the church to the branch bank.

Keizer writes, "The location of the public clock has something to say, I think, about the way a culture gives meaning to time. It was logical for a church to tell people the time when one of the things they needed to know time for was when to pray, and when church feasts and holy days colored the calendar. Equally logical is it that the bank should tell the hours to a populace for whom time is not liturgical but financial, who inhabit a fiscal year broken into quarters and the maturation periods of certificates of deposit."ⁱⁱ I've thought about his words often over these past eight months, especially on Saturday nights when I'm doing on-line banking and watching Suze Orman and wondering why I don't have 6 months of a reserve emergency fund!

Then last year, I got yet another insight into how we measure and define time in our culture. I was meeting with a group of pastors who had come to the seminary for a time of Sabbath rest. We got into a discussion about our own clocks and watches; about the difference between digital displays of time and analog...how one only allows you to see the exact moment in time with pulsing urgency, while the other sets a moment within the broader sweep of the hours. I asked for a show of hands of those wearing digital watches and those whose watches had analog faces, but only a few people raised their hands at all. Can you think why? Most of them were not wearing watches at all!

When I asked how they knew what time it was, they all held aloft their...cell phones! This is how we know what time it is today. Our connection to time is mediated by the same device that sends and receives

calls, and has voicemail, text messaging, email and the internet! Our sense of time is determined by the device that keeps us in 24-hour contact with everyone and everything and allows us to work no matter where, no matter the hour. And if you have Bluetooth, think of it! That cell phone becomes an actual part of your body! A new appendage that makes work and communication persistently present.

Perhaps it is a good and very good thing for there to be a renewed interest among many Christians for reclaiming Sabbath rest!

By this I don't mean returning to earlier versions of Sabbath keeping. Some of us especially from the South can remember, as Barbara Brown Taylor quips, that it seemed like the Bible must have read: "Remember the Sabbath day and keep it boring."ⁱⁱⁱ A long time ago, "keeping Sabbath" meant reading the Bible all day and being quiet. Someone once told me that in Montreat, NC—the Mecca of Presbyterians—there was a man who made it his business to make rounds past the houses and cottages of Montreat each Sunday. Like the religious authorities in our Gospel reading, if he found someone so much as sweeping their porch, much less playing cards or dancing, a sharp reprimand was given. In my childhood, Sabbath wasn't that strict, but still lawns weren't mowed and the mall, even the grocery stores weren't open on Sundays. Let's face it, church didn't have much competition. Even today, Georgia and a few other states are holding tightly onto the last thread of blue law...the one tied to selling wine and beer on Sundays!

Back then, keeping the Sabbath seemed to be all about prohibition (if you'll pardon the pun). "Thou shalt *not*..." But as our Jewish brothers and sisters have always understood, at its biblical best, keeping Sabbath is really about *freedom*. I think because so many of us today are feeling decidedly *un-free*, bound by so much all around us, we are exploring Sabbath again. From the beginning, observing Sabbath was meant to be at the center of our life with God. To be a practice that centers our life in God and sets us *free*.

Surely, then it is no accident that the commandment to remember the Sabbath Day and keep it holy is literally at the center of the Ten Commandments. There are three commandments about loving God, and the last six are about loving our neighbor. Right in the middle is this fourth Sabbath commandment. The rabbis teach that those who observe Sabbath observe all the other commandments. And it is this fourth one that has the

longest explanation...perhaps because it is so hard for us to get hold of in our busy, distracted lives. Yet when a Jewish person who has been away from the faith wants to return, they are counseled first to keep Sabbath as the way back in.^{iv}

In the Bible itself, there are two reasons given for keeping Sabbath in our lives. One from the Exodus version of the Ten Commandments says we are to rest on the seventh day because God rested.

Our reading from Deuteronomy 5 gives a second rationale. The people are to remember the Sabbath because once they were slaves in Egypt, but now God has set them, us, free. When they were slaves, they had no control over their time, their work, their bodies. Pharaoh was in charge of the whole of their life. There was no rest, no refreshment. Pharaoh demanded constant and impossible productivity. “Make bricks! Make more bricks!” was the only liturgical call and response. But then God set them free from slavery. With a mighty and outstretched hand God set them—and us—free. God’s free people may enjoy Sabbath rest and renewal and refreshment. We may be restored to our glad and true selves. But God extends this freedom far beyond us. God’s intended gift of Sabbath is for all living creatures, even the land itself. God means for all creation to enjoy Sabbath time.

Now, I want to confess that yesterday I knew I’d be preaching this sermon on Sabbath to you this morning. And I thought about it as I rose early and made breakfast for my children, walked the dog, moved lumber off my lawn, drove across town to participate in the Seminary graduation service, rushed home to pick up Katherine and get to her softball game, stopped at the store on the way home, and attended a dinner gathering I had said yes to some time ago. Worthy activities, mind you, but I didn’t rest and neither did anything or anyone around me!

It is hard to find this God-intended rhythm, this balance of work and rest. I read recently that in China, the polite answer to “How are you?” is “I am very busy, thank you.”^v We associate being busy with being effective, successful, even faithful. We confuse our worth with our productivity levels. If we can learn again to practice a regular rhythm of Sabbath in the midst of our work and effort, though, we may be able to remember that our true worth is found not in what we produce or earn, but in being God’s good

creation. To observe Sabbath time is to acknowledge that everything does not depend on us after all! The world is in God's good hands.

In Barbara Brown Taylor's new book, **An Altar in the World**, there is a chapter on Sabbath, which she entitles, *The Practice of Saying No*. She rightly notes that we say a false "yes" far more often than we say a faithful "no." Barbara encourages us to look carefully at our lives and discern what we may need to say "No" to, in order to say yes to God. To truly set aside a whole block of time—and on a regular basis—when we are able to rest with God, with creation, and with ourselves and so be refreshed, restored. To have our perspective and our priorities rearranged. A time set aside where we remember that God has set us free not simply *from*, but God sets us free *for* a different quality of life and relationship. God sets us free from serving Pharaoh's relentless demands so that we may serve God with our truest and gladdest selves.

So this week, I hope some of you will intentionally set aside some Sabbath time with God, with creation, with just yourself. I'm going to try to do better this week, too! We may not be able to manage a whole 24 hours at first. I think you probably have to be Jewish to be that good at it! But let's make some incremental steps toward it. As Jesus said, the Sabbath was made for us. And because Sabbath was given not just to individuals, but to a whole community, I hope this summer will be a sabbatical time for you as a congregation as well as for Jill. That there will be time set aside to reflect and be still. To discern what you as a congregation may need to say a faithful "No" to in order to say "Yes" with energy, intelligence, imagination and love to the new thing God may be leading you to do and to be.

If you try Sabbath this week, you might begin the practice as Jewish people do. Light two candles. One is for Sabbath rest. The other candle is for Sabbath freedom. May they light the way toward God...and toward your true and glad and *nepheshed* self.

Amen.

ⁱ Walter Brueggemann, **Mandate to Difference: An Invitation to the Contemporary Church** (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 149-150.

ⁱⁱ Garret Keizer, **A Dresser of Sycamore Trees: The Finding of a Ministry** (Boston: David R. Godine, Publisher, 2001), 79-86.

ⁱⁱⁱ Barbara Brown Taylor, **An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith** (HarperOne, 2009), 127.

^{iv} Taylor, 134.

^v Taylor, 123.