

The Gift of Sabbath

Sermon 68 | Greystone Baptist Church | August 16, 2020

Leviticus 25: 1-7

Week of Virtual School | 23rd Sunday of COVID19 | Call Weekend for Dr. Christian McIvor

I once heard a wise woman say that if you refuse to keep Sabbath – to pause from your work for the purpose of rest, gratitude, worship, and delight – then you should not be surprised when your body forces an unwanted Sabbath upon you.

I knew she was right because of my own stubborn experience. I remember this quote every time my husband tells me I need to slow down or take a break. He's usually right, and he'll remind me of it when I get sick a week or two later. Forced Sabbath, I think, and then I laugh at myself and vow to recover as quickly as possible so I can get back to work refusing to admit to human limitations and the need for rest that we all experience.

Like young children who've stayed up long past their bedtime, kicking and screaming, refusing to get into bed, protesting relentlessly, "I'm not tired! I'm not tired!" ... many of us grown people are trapped, by our own choosing, in rhythms of work and rest (or lack thereof) that are leading us straight to the medical doctor with high blood pressure and also to the therapist with the stress caused by our never-ending work.

There are physical reasons that God's commandment to cease from our work, one day out of every seven, just makes good sense.

A similar logic is considered when farmers leave their land fallow for a season, allowing the land to rejuvenate and restore after lending its nutrients to plants in preceding growing seasons. Of course, leaving farmland unplanted would mean fewer crops and less profit. However, studies have shown that letting land lie fallow for one season benefits the soil and in most cases leads to a higher yield in subsequent times of harvest.

Over time, and with scientific advancements, many farmers have shifted techniques. Rather than leaving land fallow, open, and unplanted for an entire season, there are now chemical treatments that can be applied to boost the depleted nutrients without enduring the loss of profit.

Before we get too judgmental about chemical substitutes for fallowing the land, let us consider how we rush to the coffee pot or grab that 5-hour-energy drink at the gas station on the way to work... just a little something to help us move beyond the physical signs that our bodies need rest.

There is a grueling rhythm of work and rest (or lack thereof) that we have created and enabled in our society. Children and teenagers pack their weeks with academic and extra-curricular activities intended to hone skills in the classroom and on the playing field. These experiences will beef up resumes for college applications and get them started down the path toward success. Young adults put in unthinkable hours at work, trying to

establish themselves professionally. Mid-career, when we think we might settle into a more sustainable rhythm, we recognize that it is too late. We have already set the tone and established the patterns of work and, well... more work, that will shape our lives. As we near retirement, many begin to grow insecure and worry about job security. So the patterns continue and the work life becomes our whole life.

Now, if we are Bible-believing people who value the Ten Commandments and prioritize the laws of Leviticus over the ways of this world, then why is it that we have such a hard time establishing and honoring these divinely-ordained rhythms of work and rest in our own lives? And how is it that we overlook our commitment to honoring the land that grows our food, cleans our air, and provides the very literal ground upon which our entire lives are built?

It is a shame that we don't take these verses as seriously as we do some other parts of the Bible. If we did, we might not find ourselves in this never-ending cycle of work, work, work, and more work. From Sinai God speaks the commandment to Moses saying, "Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord, your God," (Exodus 20: 8-10a). A similar law is restated to the Israelites as they prepare to enter the promised land. This time expanding the call and reminding them that the concept of Sabbath rest is not only for them, but it is one that is intended for all of creation – even the parts having no voice to cry in exhaustion.

...Six years you shall sow your field, and six years you shall prune your vineyard, and gather in their yield; but in the seventh year there shall be a Sabbath of complete rest for the land, a Sabbath for the Lord. (3-4a)

Whatever the land produces in this sabbatical year could be eaten, but the word of God was clear – no planting, nurturing, or harvesting during the seventh year. The seventh year the land would lie fallow. For those of us with small, backyard vegetable gardens, this commandment would be difficult enough to follow. But for the Israelites who lived from their land and what it could produce, this was a huge personal and economic commitment. To take Sabbath and to give the land Sabbath meant fully relying on God to provide for a full year. ...every seven years! But for the health and well-being of the land, humanity must give the land rest in the Sabbath year, regardless of the profits which will be lost in that year's time.

If we were to continue reading in the 25th chapter of Leviticus we would discover that the concept of Sabbath is not only about rest and the cessation of productivity, rather, Sabbath is about wholeness, freedom, and delight for all people no matter who they were or where they'd come from. Sabbath is for the land, the plants, and the animals that dwell upon it. Sabbath is an economic reality, it is a social reality, and most importantly, it is a spiritual reality into which we are all invited – time and time again.

Rabbi Abraham Heschel wrote in his book called *The Sabbath*,
"The meaning of the Sabbath is to celebrate time rather than space.

Six days a week we live under the tyranny of things of space;
on the Sabbath we try to become attuned to holiness in time.
It is a day on which we are called upon to share in what is eternal in time,
to turn from the results of creation to the mystery of creation;
from the world of creation to the creation of the world."¹

The varied and long-lasting interruptions caused by COVID19 have become a sort of unwanted Sabbath for many of us... and for our world. Just as illness often sets in when our bodies are pushed to the max and we desperately need to rest, this pandemic has exposed some of the pressure points in our personal lives and in our communities. Many of those stress-points are begging for renewal... and this forced Sabbath might just be that opportunity.

COVID has altered our patterns of life and work, creating for us the perfect opportunity to reboot our patterns. Could this be a holy invitation to re-build our lives in a way that prioritizes Sabbath rest?

Six months ago, no one would have imagined that the school year would begin this way, with most students engaging primarily online. In the same way, no one could have imagined that this church (and many other churches) would still be meeting for worship online, no one anticipated that we would still be outside of our sanctuary for so long!

This unwelcome interruption feels like a fallow year, in many ways as our calendars are stripped of in-person gatherings and large-scale community events. But I remember that old agricultural principle that suggests that after a fallow year, the land often yields a bigger harvest. Could it be that this season of rest from business as usual is actually good for us all? Could this be our holy invitation to give up all control, to sit still, to watch, to listen, and to delight in the mystery of divine creation unfolding all around us?

In this season, nothing is as it used to be. Which is an opportunity to set things up the way they ought to be. Perhaps as we prepare for the beginning of a new school year... as we anticipate the beginning of a new church year in just a few weeks... as we prayerfully consider a new chapter of ministry with a new member of our ministerial staff team... as compassion camp comes to an end... and we are all hoping for a fresh start...

Perhaps we might choose to include Sabbath as we rebuild and start anew... Sabbath that causes us to cease from all of our work and productivity, Sabbath that moves us from seeking only the results of creation, and instead draws us deeper into the mystery of creation.

There and only there will we ever find holy delight.

Oh Lord, may it be so.

¹ <https://jewishcamp.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Words3AppendixSabbathTexts.pdf>