

Sabbath Practice

I'm curious how that two minutes felt. Long? Not long enough? Uncomfortable? Delightful? Even in a space when expect quiet moments, two minutes can feel like a long time to be quiet. We are so accustomed to noise, to busyness, to production, to content and product that a two minute interruption of silence can feel like a lifetime. I guess being quiet takes practice, at least for me.

“Come to me all who are weary and carrying heavy burdens.” On Wednesday during bible study, I'm not sure we realized we were even holding our breath, but when we read that text out loud, it was if the entire room exhaled. Hearing these words from Jesus inspired a release we did not seem to know we needed. Then I asked if anyone had memories about the Sabbath growing up. The room shifted 180 degrees. Almost everyone tensed up. There were even a few groans. There was discussion about Sunday drives to visit relatives, no roller skating, and sitting and listening to adults while wearing Sunday clothes and trying to hold your breath and keep from squirming just long enough to be rewarded with special cookies. The Sabbath memories carried a sense of burden, memories of so many “no's” and off-limits. Sabbath became a weight of sorts, a burden.

But that's not how it started, and I'm not convinced that it is how it has to be. Over the next few weeks, we'll look more closely at the notion of Sabbath and what form it takes—or can take—for us as individuals and as a community. But before we can do any sort of deep dive, it might help if we look at how this practice began. The Ten Commandments are first given to the people Israel as they wander in the desert. They have been slaves for generations and now as they make their way toward the Promised Land, God calls them into covenant. God promises to be their God and invites them to covenant—or promise—to be God's people, and there are ground rules. At the top of the list is the call to worship God and God alone. There are others of course, several “thou shall not” commands, but then there is the one we're focused on for today, and unlike “you shall not murder,” this one is a bit longer and it is stated in the affirmative. Instead of a “don't,” Sabbath is a “do,” one that was not an option just a few years before, which the text explains in depth. Sabbath is a mark of a free people. As slaves they measured their days in bricks and beatings, with no break unless the taskmaster gave them one. They could

not predict when such a break would come—if it would come. They had no agency over their schedule. Pharaoh’s demands set the agenda; the empire’s claims got top billing, the only billing really. There was not room or time for anything else. And now, as they stand at the edge of the Promised Land, God wants to remind them what they are to be about and who they are called to be as God’s people. They are a people defined first and foremost by their covenant with God, and God calls them to live out that covenant in the rhythm of their days and weeks. This covenant informs and shapes what they do and what they do not do. They devote their hearts first and foremost to the Lord of all. They keep their promises and care for their elders. They tell the truth. They don’t waste their days pining away for their neighbor’s house or livestock or spouse or bank account or four-car garage. And they step off of the treadmill and stop. One day a week they step away and pause, because, thanks to God, they can. They are no longer slaves because God has liberated them from Pharaoh. They are free people, *freed* people because of God, so they are to set aside one day out of seven for rest and worship, two precious luxuries slaves never imagined.

The Israelites who entered the Promised Land were not actually slaves themselves, of course. They were the grandchildren and great-grandchildren of slaves. And yet as they stand on the edge of that new chapter, God still insists that Moses make it clear how they are called to live in this new land, in this new chapter. They don’t live in a bubble. They will not be carving out a life or a living on a blank slate. The people of ancient Israel were a mighty but small band compared to the peoples around them. The larger world’s rhythms and patterns were seductive and persuasive. They still are. And yet in every age it is this relationship with the Lord of the Universe that ultimately defines them, and so even in the midst of other peoples and practices, they and we are called to live out loud as the children of God. And one way they stand out is by drawing a clear boundary around a day for rest and worship. As the *Sesame Street* song goes, “One of these things is not like the other...” And neither are we.

So Sabbath is a gift of God for the people of God, an invitation to step away from the tugs of the other six days and welcome a chance to breathe, to rest, to pull our nose from the grindstone and lift our eyes to see and savor the life God gives us. Because that’s just it: life is a gift, no matter how hard we have worked or how many hours we have billed or years we have logged, life has been given to us. We do not make air fill our lungs

or blood cells carry oxygen to our tissues. We do not cause the sun to rise or the moon to wane. We can take no credit for the rush of hummingbird wings or the taste of a ripe peach. But if we only move through our days at breakneck speed, if we spend every precious breath pointing out how others get it wrong—whatever “it” may be, if we insist on filling every moment with noise or busyness, we risk forgetting who we are and whose we are. We are no longer slaves, but to look at our calendars, our blood pressure, our Facebook feeds, or our clenched jaws, it might be hard for us or anyone else to believe it.

And that’s where I think that deep exhale came from on Wednesday. While the folks gathered at that table are retired for the most part, they and we live in a 24/7 world, a world that has no real interest in Sabbath, which I think makes our need for Sabbath all the more profound. I know I am not alone in grieving the ways the world around us no longer carves out space for Sabbath. Stores are open on Sunday; soccer games are played on Sunday; shifts and meetings and swim meets are scheduled on Sunday. We used to be able to lean on the culture to give at least some of us time for rest and worship and renewal. We no longer can. And that’s a loss, but I wonder if it could also be an opportunity? An invitation, even.

Like those ancient Israelites, we are not the driving force behind the way the world works, not anymore anyway, and yet, we are still God’s beloved ones in the midst of God’s beloved ones, in the thick of God’s broken and beloved world. But too often, we play by the larger world’s rules and follow the dominant culture’s script. Sabbath is an invitation to go a different way. For all of its glitz and glam, for all of its insistence that our life is incomplete without this or that, the larger world is really not all that concerned with what is truly good for us. God is. There will always be another thing that we must be outraged about this very minute and another thing that the culture tells us we must have to enjoy a full life. But God understands that no one and nothing else can bring us the rest we need, that no one and nothing else can free us from all that would claim us, that nothing and no one else ultimately has our best interest at heart like God does.

So if I believe that Sabbath is a gift, an invitation to let down my burdens, and encouragement to pattern our moments around God’s timing, what exactly does that look like? What shape does it take? I think one of the best a-ha moments for me this past week is that other than calling us to stop one day a week, to let others stop, too, and to savor this stopping as something sacred, God leaves Sabbath blessedly open. It is almost as if the

God who fashions us knows that what restores and refreshes us will not be a one-size-fits-all thing. Each one of us is unique, so what restores us will be unique, too. Worshipping together is one piece of the Sabbath puzzle, but there are other pieces as well. There are things to consider pausing, like email, social media, phone calls, to-do lists, and worrying about everyone and everything, but there are things to say “yes,” to as well, invitations to savor the life God showers upon us. And so we say no, we stop some things, and that just might give us room to say “yes” to others. Maybe baking makes your heart sing. Maybe a leisurely hike or an afternoon standing in the middle of the Yellow Breeches with a fly rod is your thing. Maybe a drive with no specific destination in mind helps you exhale. Maybe simply sitting in your favorite chair with a mug of your favorite tea or a lazy game of Candy Land with a grandchild or a picnic with a spouse or an ice cream cone with your four-legged friend is the very thing to help you exhale. Whatever it is, over the next few weeks, I want to invite you, invite us to find a way to be intentional about pausing, stopping, and finding a way to embrace Sabbath, not as a burden, but as a gift. Because the news will continue to unfold, the to-do list will never be finished, the demands will continue to pile up and pile on. There will always be a crisis vying for our attention and an urgent need demanding our time and our energy. Those won’t stop, but we must—not because God demands it, but because God knows we need it.

What if we began to take Sabbath seriously? What would it do to us and for us to be intentional about carving out time and space to stop and remember that the earth will continue to spin, that the rain will continue to fall, and that the sun will continue to shine without our help? Sabbath-keeping is not our default drive. If it were a natural move, I’m not sure God would need to command us to take it. If we were able to step away easily from all that makes us weary, from all that wears us down, I don’t think Jesus would need to issue the invitation.

“Observe the Sabbath and keep it holy.” “Come to me all who are weary, and I will give you rest.” Breathe deeply. Exhale fully. We are no longer slaves. We are God’s beloved children. God knows what is good for us. God wants what is good for us. We have permission to stop every so often and savor that good news, to rest in that promise. In fact we are expected to. It just may take some practice.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.