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Editorial

Sheila Klassen-Wiebe

One Sunday I wanted to bake cookies, and my mother gently reprimanded me: Sunday is a day for rest, not work. Even when the grain was ripe and rain was forecast, my father never worked in the fields on Sunday. Keeping the Sabbath holy was serious business for my family and my church. Since those early years, my thinking about Sabbath has changed, but the importance of remembering the Sabbath has continued.

The commandment to "remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy" appears in two forms in the Old Testament. In Exodus 20:8–11, Israel is commanded to keep the Sabbath because God created the world in six days and rested on the seventh. In Deuteronomy 5:12–15, God's people are to keep the Sabbath by remembering that God redeemed them from slavery in Egypt and by granting rest to their households. In both versions, the Sabbath is a gift from God. Keeping the Sabbath reminds us that God is in charge of the world and we are not, that God's creating and redeeming activity exists prior to all our activities. To keep the Sabbath holy means to set apart a time and space to remember and to rest. The liberating intention of the Sabbath is reflected also in the laws about the Sabbath year (Lev. 25:1–7) and the Jubilee year (Lev. 25:8–55), with their social-economic implications for the entire community.

How we should honor these commandments has been debated over the centuries. Jesus himself contributed to the debate by interpreting the Sabbath in ways that were sometimes out of step with his contemporaries' convictions. *That* the Sabbath was important, however, was never in question.

This issue of *Vision* invites readers to consider Sabbath from a rich variety of perspectives and to contemplate the ongoing significance of Sabbath. We begin with a sermon by April Yamasaki, which introduces many of the themes and texts in this issue—all from the perspective of Jesus as Lord of the Sabbath. The next two articles in this issue consider the implications of Sabbath for whole communities and for all creation. Spencer Bradford examines Sabbath principles of social equity and economic justice on the basis of biblical accounts of "enough for all," while Katerina Friesen considers the Christian hope for eschatological Sabbath rest in light of a creation groaning under human exploitation. From here we turn to the challenges of practicing Sabbath in a frenetically busy world: Marlene Kropf offers two essential pillars undergirding the Sabbath experience, and Carrie Martens suggests focal practices for families with children. Rabbi Karen Soria describes rituals and biblical principles of Sabbath observance from her Jewish tradition's rich heritage. Two pastors, Rudy Dirks and Paul Mo, offer perspectives on the gifts and challenges of honoring the Sabbath by sharing about their personal journeys. In the next two essays, we move back to the implications of Sabbath for creation and for just relationships: Randy S. Woodley reflects on how indigenous theological perspectives on creation and shalom living can inform our Sabbath keeping, and Aiden Enns describes one community's creative witness to taking a sabbath from oppressive habits of consumption. Derek Suderman offers yet another angle on Sabbath; he suggests that both Jesus and the Pharisees were concerned about being faithful to Scripture, and that from these Sabbath controversies we can learn something about ethical discernment. Finally, Ron Guengerich reviews Walter Brueggemann's influential recent work on Sabbath and highlights resources for those who want to read more on the topic.

The articles in this issue offer a rich diversity of reflections on the topic of Sabbath. And yet, throughout the issue certain words and ideas bubble up repeatedly: *gift*, *delight*, *shalom*, and *trust in a God who provides*. These words point to the invitational, life-giving intention of Sabbath. May this issue stir us to such an honoring of the Sabbath, even as we wait with longing for the "Sabbath rest that still remains."

About the editor

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Lord of the Sabbath, Lord of All

A sermon

April Yamasaki

When I was in university and part of Campus Crusade for Christ (now Cru), I was given a pamphlet with two diagrams of the Christian life. In both diagrams, life appeared as a circle, and within each, there was an *x* mark for family, another *x* for friends, another for university studies, another for our Bible study group, another for a part-time job, another for the weekly discount movie night, and others for whatever other activities engaged us. As busy students, my friends and I had a lot of *x*'s for all the people and activities in our lives.

Jesus's lordship is the focus of a pair of Sabbath stories in Mark 2:23–3:6. What do they show us about how we are to understand Jesus as Lord? And what does that lordship mean for our understanding of Sabbath?

In each circle, there was also a cross to represent Jesus. In the one diagram, Jesus was simply another mark randomly placed among all of the *x*'s, but in the other diagram, the cross was on a throne with all of the other *x*'s arranged around it. The two diagrams were meant to illustrate the difference between having Jesus as part of our lives, and recognizing Jesus as the centre and Lord of life who orients everything else. The second diagram was meant to show that the lordship of Jesus determines how we relate to our family and friends, how we choose our courses and do our jobs, how we use our leisure time, how we live out our faith—in the church and in the world at large. The lordship of Jesus changes and challenges our entire way of life.

In the New Testament, Jesus's lordship is the focus of a pair of Sabbath stories in Mark 2:23–3:6. Both stories take place in a particular time and culture, and both can also speak to us today. What do these stories show us about how we are to understand Jesus as Lord? And what does that lordship mean for our understanding of Sabbath?

The Sabbath was made for humankind

In the first story (Mark 2:23–28), some Pharisees criticize Jesus's disciples for picking grain on the Sabbath, and Jesus defends them by telling the story of how David and his men once ate bread from the temple that was by law reserved only for the priests. Technically, David and his men had broken the law, but practically this story was accepted as part of the Pharisees' own history. Applying the same logic to the rules concerning the Sabbath, Jesus concludes, "The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath" (v. 27).[1]

In the second Sabbath story (3:1–6), Jesus heals a man with a withered hand. According to the rabbis, healing on the Sabbath was allowed only in life-or-death situations. If a sheep or an ox was injured and would die without attention, a person was permitted to do whatever work was necessary to save it—even on the Sabbath. In this case, however, the man with the withered hand was apparently in no danger of imminent death. His healing could have waited until the Sabbath was over.

Instead of waiting, however, Jesus applies the teaching of the rabbis in a new way. "Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?" he asks the Pharisees who are present (v. 4). When they refuse to answer him, Jesus restores the man's hand. Once again, he demonstrates that "the sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath" (2:27).

Reorienting Sabbath

In the world of Mark's Gospel, the Sabbath played a significant role in Jewish tradition and faith. Sabbath was grounded in the story of creation with its six days of creative work followed by a seventh day of rest. It was shaped by the people's history of exodus from Egypt and formed part of the Ten Commandments. Sabbath meant setting aside their regular plowing, reaping, baking, sewing, and other work for a day of restoration and worship. It was a mark of their identity as God's people, and a practical demonstration of their trust in God. Sabbath was a way of life.

Keeping the Sabbath was also a way of life for Jesus. At the start of Jesus' ministry, Luke 4 describes how Jesus "went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, *as was his custom*" (Luke 4:16;

italics added). He took many more Sabbath moments as he prayed in the early morning (Mark 1:35), at the end of a busy day (Mark 6:46), and late into the night (Mark 14:32–42). After a long mission of teaching and healing, he encouraged his disciples, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while" (Mark 6:31). Sabbath was woven into the fabric of Jesus's life as much as it was for any observant Jew of his day.

Instead of following the letter of the law, Jesus reflects God's intention for the Sabbath as a time of restoration. Instead of orienting his life around the Sabbath as it was narrowly interpreted by the Pharisees, Jesus reorients the Sabbath.

But in these two stories, Jesus defends his disciples for picking grain on the Sabbath, and he himself performs the work of healing on a Sabbath day. Instead of following the letter of the law concerning the Sabbath, Jesus reflects God's intention for the Sabbath as a time of restoration. Instead of orienting his life around the Sabbath as it was narrowly interpreted by the Pharisees, Jesus reorients the Sabbath. As in my diagram from Campus Crusade, it's as if Jesus takes his place on the throne and puts the Sabbath in its appropriate place. For all its significance, the Sabbath is not an end in itself. As Jesus says to the Pharisees, "the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath" (Mark 2:28).

The Gospel of John proclaims that "all things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being" (John 1:3). This conviction is echoed by Colossians 1:15–16: "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him." In other words, everything—including Sabbath rest—came into being through Christ, the divine Word of God. The Sabbath was created through him and for him. So Jesus Christ, the incarnate one, is Lord of the Sabbath.

A matter of healthy balance?

Flash forward to our own day, where there seems to be a renewed interest in the Sabbath. Physician Matthew Sleeth shares his account of Sabbath practice in his book *24/6: A Prescription for a*

Healthier, Happier Life. Mary McKibben Dana writes about her family's yearlong experiment in *Sabbath in the Suburbs: A Family's Experiment with Holy Time*. Within the Judeo-Christian tradition and beyond, others speak of the need for rest and restoration, of finding an appropriate balance between work and the rest of life, of recovering a sustainable rhythm of life that is productive and with sufficient margin for rest.

All of that is well and good. For those of us struggling with multiple demands and multiple roles, Sabbath rest is a welcome release. It pulls us back from the edge of burnout to a simpler and healthier way of living. Sabbath time that allows us to recharge as individuals and as families, that provides time for rest and worship, is a wonderful gift. With the psalmist we acknowledge:

> *The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.*
> *He makes me lie down in green pastures;*
> *he leads me beside still waters;*
> *he restores my soul. (Ps. 23:1–3a).*

A matter of justice

If that's all Jesus meant by the Sabbath, I don't think the Pharisees would have been so angry, nor would they have immediately begun plotting to get rid of him, as they did at the end or our text (Mark 3:6). And if we just see Sabbath today as a time to relax and take care of ourselves, it won't make any waves for us. But Jesus's claim to be Lord of the Sabbath pushes us beyond Sabbath as self-care to something more.

If Jesus had just been talking about self-care, I don't think the Pharisees would have been so angry, nor would they have immediately begun plotting to get rid of him. And if we just see Sabbath as a time to relax, it won't make waves.

In the first of the two Sabbath stories, Jesus allows his disciples to pick and eat the grain, just as David and his men ate the bread of the temple—because they were hungry. In the second story, he heals the man with the withered hand because the man is in need of healing. In both, Jesus as Lord of the Sabbath exercises his power in good and life-giving ways in behalf of humankind.

In both, Jesus is not exactly resting, but he is keeping the Sabbath as in Isaiah 56, where the prophet clearly links Sabbath keeping with maintaining justice and doing what is right:

Thus says the L*ORD:*
Maintain justice, and do what is right,
for soon my salvation will come,
and my deliverance be revealed.

Happy is the mortal who does this,
the one who holds it fast,
who keeps the sabbath, not profaning it,
and refrains from doing any evil. (Isa. 56:1–2)

In these words from the prophet Isaiah, and in Jesus's own example, Sabbath keeping means doing good instead of evil, acting in life-giving ways instead of causing harm or allowing harm to go unchecked. This doesn't by any means contradict the practice of Sabbath as rest and restoration, but it enlarges the meaning of Sabbath beyond individual and personal refreshment to focus on the good of others.

A communal good

After all, the rhythm of work and rest embedded in creation was not for any one individual but for the benefit of the human community. In Exodus 23:12, Sabbath rest is not only for the Hebrew people as God's chosen ones but also for their animals and their slaves and the strangers living among them: "Six days you shall do your work, but on the seventh day you shall rest, so that your ox and your donkey may have relief, and your homeborn slave and the resident alien may be refreshed."

What would Sabbath look like if we thought of it less as individual self-care and more as a quality of our life together as a community?

What would Sabbath look like if we thought of it less as individual self-care and more as a quality of our life together as a community? What if we thought of it less as a time to be free of responsibilities and to "do nothing" and more as a time to act in life-giving ways both for ourselves and for others? If Jesus is truly Lord of our Sabbath, what would that look like?

"You shall keep *my* sabbaths"

Even as I write this, I know that I'm not saying it quite right—because over and over in scripture, God says, "You shall keep *my* sabbaths" (Exod. 31:13; Lev. 19:3, 30; 26:2); "I gave them *my* sabbaths" (Ezek. 20:12); "They shall keep *my* sabbaths holy" (Ezek. 44:24) (italics added). So when we keep the Sabbath, it's not really "my" Sabbath or "our" Sabbath—it's *God's* Sabbath that refreshes and restores us; it's *God's* Sabbath that is to be lived out in good and life-giving ways.

As Lord of the Sabbath and Lord of All, Jesus radically redefines all of life. Let us follow where he leads us, in Sabbath rest and worship, in doing good and expressing ourselves in life-giving ways, for ourselves and others. Amen.

Note

Scripture quotations are from the NRSV.

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Enough for our needs, enough for the needs of all

Sabbath economics

Spencer Bradford

The Sabbath stream in Scripture offers an essential constructive framing of God's purposes for our material existence and our relationships with property. As Christ's incarnation and death make love tangible, so the biblical calls and commands related to Sabbath give concrete form to stewardship.

A backward look: Paul and Exodus 16

For a canonical perspective on how Sabbath addresses economic justice, it's helpful to start toward the end of the trajectory, with the witness of Paul in 2 Corinthians 8. In verses 1–11, Paul exhorts the Corinthian church to fulfill—and even increase—their pledge to the financial collection Paul was gathering for the distressed Jerusalem church. In the climax of his exhortation Paul points to the purpose of the Corinthians' sharing from their financial abundance to meet the need in Jerusalem: it is "a matter of equality" so "that there may be equality" or "a fair balance" (vv. 13, 14). This text offers a teleological principle to conform to what God in Christ had already established (8:9): the aim or purpose of the collection is equality. Paul concludes his argument with an appeal to Exodus 16:18, which describes the collection of manna by each Hebrew household in the wilderness: "The one who gathered more didn't have too much, and the one who gathered less didn't have too little."[1]

The manna in the Exodus 16 Sabbath story signifies God's material provision of enough for all the people. As much as Sabbath orients people to rely on God to supply enough for our needs, Sabbath also and inseparably orients us to accept God's provision for the needs of *all* the people.

Paul makes no explicit reference to Sabbath here, but his association of the Greco-Roman socioethical term *isotes* (equality, equity, fairness) with the manna story in Exodus 16 sets us on the trail of the role and purpose of Sabbath as exemplified in this account. In Exodus 16 we find the freed Hebrew slaves between their deliverance by God at the Red Sea and God's covenant commands at Mt. Sinai. To feed their hunger, God sends manna daily for everyone to gather as food, and "everyone collected just as much as they could eat" (16:18), with no one having too much and no one having too little. In verses 22–30, we read that God provided twice as much manna on the sixth day, instructing the people to bake or boil it and to keep the leftovers until morning; then on the seventh day, the Sabbath, people would rest. The story describes God's determination to meet the needs of the whole people. And it also describes their resistance to relying on God.

Sabbath appears in this context for the first time in the story of Israel, a fact that calls our attention to three aspects of this provision. First, the command to observe the Sabbath is, narratively speaking, the first commandment in the wilderness. Before Moses receives the covenant commandments on Mt. Sinai, even before God speaks the Ten Commandments to all the people at Mt. Sinai, the people are summoned to practice Sabbath. Like the place of Sabbath in the creation story (Gen. 2:2–3), this placement indicates that Sabbath has a significance and importance prior to and extending beyond the Mosaic covenant.

Second, Sabbath has to do with our reception of God's material provision, and it addresses our resistance to relying on God's provision. Traditionally, much Sabbath practice focuses our awareness on God's provision of enough time to rest from productivity, but this story focuses on God's supply of enough food, enough material sustenance, to meet the people's needs, and it also gives attention to the difficulty we humans have with trusting God to provide for us. The narrative placement of this story in the wilderness reminds us that this Sabbath command deals with God's intentions for how hunger is to be addressed, and it speaks to a misguided human temptation to accumulate more than we need.

Finally, the manna in this Sabbath story signifies God's material provision of enough for all the people. Everyone collected enough for what they needed, with the result that those who had more than others didn't have too much, and those who had less didn’t have too little. Everyone had only as much as they could use. While many interpreters take this description in verse 18 to imply a miraculous divine leveling, others (such as John Calvin) read the text as also allowing a human redistribution during the measuring-out process. As much as Sabbath orients people to rely on God to supply enough for our needs, Sabbath also and inseparably orients us to accept God’s provision for the needs of *all* the people. Everyone enjoyed the benefits of God’s material provision equitably, and this enjoyment was related to a boundary or limitation on how much each individual could gather or store up. Hoarding was excluded; it conflicted with both reliance on God and fairness toward neighbors.

In the context of Exodus 16, the very term *Sabbath* takes on a deeper meaning. Typically the word is associated with the Hebrew word for “stop” or “cease,” as in “stop working” and “cease labor.” Certainly, the Hebrews in Exodus 16 were commanded to stop working for the Sabbath day, but the manna story also points toward ceasing to hoard and gather anxiously, and ceasing to seek to acquire more than one’s hungry neighbors have. This is the Sabbath equity about which Paul addressed his audience.

In Exodus 16, the term *Sabbath* takes on a deeper meaning. Typically the word is associated with the Hebrew word for “stop” or “cease. Here it points toward ceasing to hoard and gather anxiously, and ceasing to seek to acquire more than one’s hungry neighbors have.

The fourth commandment: Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5

The Sabbath commandment in the Decalogue, as it is recorded in both Exodus 20:8–11 and Deuteronomy 5:12–15, instructs that on the seventh day of each week, everyone—including the lowest-ranking laborers, slaves, and migrants—is to have rest and relief from labor. This weekly rest also includes nonhuman creatures, the domesticated animals whose labor contributes to human economic well-being. Thus the Sabbath commandment includes worker protections and natural resource protections as holy priorities on a par with commandments dealing with care for family, truthfulness, marital faithfulness, and protecting life from violence. Economic and environmental protections go back to

Moses and are among the core patterns of moral life as shaped by divine law in the Ten Commandments.

Weekly Sabbath observance was to remind the community that in God's eyes, all of us have equal dignity and a value that exceeds the value of what we own, what we earn, or what our status is—whether that of owner or laborer. The Deuteronomist's version of the command connects Sabbath and liberation from slavery. It reminds us that God means to deliver people from economic oppression to a shared abundance, and it calls us to identify with those slaves in a way that would prevent gross inequities and oppression in our own communities.

Through the weekly practice of Sabbath, God calls his covenant people to renew their vision of one another and to relate to one another on the basis of God's care and provision for all the people together, not on the basis of who has accumulated enough wealth to have leisure and who has to labor to scrape together enough income to pay for this week's necessities. Informed by Paul's interpretive approach, we learn from the Sabbath commandment that our value in God's eyes and our value in one another's eyes have a base and a measure apart from what we produce or sell, own or owe. God initiated Sabbath practices so that we would cease our effort to maximize productivity, profit, consumption, and accumulation. Sabbath practices point to a greater purpose for human life. The Sabbath command is part of a divine effort to strictly limit the ways the market dictates the value of human life, with an impact that extends beyond the Sabbath day itself to reframe the purpose of economic exchange on the other days of the week.

The Sabbath years

The theopolitical core and aim of Sabbath for economic life is clearly enunciated in the Pentateuch's commands given for Sabbath years and the Jubilee. In Exodus 23:10–11, every seventh year is to be a fallow year for the land; tilling, planting, pruning, and reaping are to stop. Leviticus 25:2–7 calls this year a Sabbath rest for the land. This sabbatical year amplifies the egalitarian protections for the poor and marginalized that we find distilled in the fourth commandment and the manna story (see Exod. 23:12). Exodus 23:11 instructs that while agricultural work is to cease during the sabbatical year, the natural produce of the land, vines, and trees during that year is to be for the poor among the people to eat. What the poor do not eat is to be left for the wild animals. This text extends the fourth commandment's attention to protection of natural resources, taking it beyond care for domestic animals (see also Exod. 23:12) to provision for wild animals (see also Lev. 25:7) and rest for the land itself. Here we see the Sabbath equity principle going beyond the egalitarianism of the Sabbath day to the broader operation of the economy.

The sabbatical year commands indicate that the Sabbath vision is also the theoethical source of annual gleaning rights for the poor (immigrants, orphans, and widows) from the fields, groves, and vineyards (Deut. 24:19–22; Lev. 19:9–10; 23:22). In addition, this access to the fields was supplemented by a triennial tithe of produce (Deut. 14:28–29) for immigrants, orphans, and widows, and also for the Levites, who did not hold land. Together, these systemic regulations gave the poor access to the economy's produce and established an egalitarian view of human life that limited and directed the rights of property ownership. Even amid recurrently emerging disparities, sabbatical year provisions would ensure that that those who had much did not hold too much and those with little did not have too little. Leviticus 25:6 emphatically asserts this egalitarianism between poor and propertied; the sabbatical year provisions meant that people in poverty and people with property relied together on shared food; the natural growth from the land is food "for you, for your male and female servants, and for your hired laborers and foreign guests who live with you." As in the Sabbath story of dependence on manna, in the sabbatical year all demonstrate their reliance on God's provision, and all are equally dependent materially on God's grace.

Exodus 23:10–12 extends the fourth commandment's attention to protection of natural resources, taking it beyond care for domestic animals to provision for wild animals and rest for the land itself.

The word used in Exodus 23:11 for the land's "rest" (*shemit*) also means "release." In Deuteronomy 15, then, the sabbatical year marks not only release for the land but also release from debt: "Every creditor shall release what he has lent to his neighbor" (Deut. 15:2, ESV). Unlike the food distribution laws, these

Deuteronomic releases are limited to Israelites, but through these laws the Sabbath principle of equity extends into another aspect of economic life, credit and debt. Loans were to be released every seven years, and any Israelites who had become debt slaves had to be offered release in the seventh year (Deut. 15:12–18). Their forced labor could not extend beyond six years.

Leviticus 25 not only reinforces the practice of the land Sabbath every seventh year (vv. 2–7), it also institutes a Jubilee Sabbath of Sabbaths every fifty years (vv. 8–34). This Jubilee redistributes the land back to tribal and familial assignments, a process that guards against concentration of land capital for the few and perpetual poverty for the many. And the Jubilee Sabbath, like Deuteronomy, provides for release of Israelite slaves (vv. 39–55). In our consideration of the nature and practice of Sabbath, the concept of *release* (with its concrete forms of economic equalization) should be given a significance like that of *rest*.

We have not explored other factors surrounding sabbatical year commandments in their ancient social context: the interrelationships of various sabbatical years, the theology of God's ownership of the land and God's rule over the people, the character and role of slavery in the ancient Near East, and the nature and role of loans in the agrarian economies of ancient Near Eastern society. But again and again these texts in the Pentateuch articulate this key element of Sabbath economics, connecting faith in God with social equity: "Fear your God, that your brother may live beside you. . . . You shall not rule over him ruthlessly but shall fear your God" (Lev. 25:36b, 43, ESV). "You shall not harden your heart or shut your hand against your poor brother, but you shall open your hand to him and lend him sufficient for his need, whatever it may be. . . . There will never cease to be poor in the land. Therefore I command you, 'You shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor, in your land' " (Deut. 15:7b–8, 11, ESV; compare Lev. 25:36–43). Sabbath instructions did not create a social utopia in ancient Israel, but they enjoin—as a divine priority—systemic action for social equity and economic justice as a remedy to economic inequality.

Prophetic vision and Gospel proclamation

Israel's prophets also offer instruction about Sabbath equity for those without property to sustain them—the poor, the immigrant, the orphan, the widow, the slave. The Sabbath commands identify these categories of people as vulnerable because of social inequity. Attention to their need is to be a priority for kings and other authorities, and failure to protect and provide for them is cause for divine judgment and social disaster (Isa. 10:1–2; Jer. 22:15–17; Ezek. 22:6–8, 29–31; Amos 8:4–8; Zech. 7:8–11). The psalmists described God's own identity as wrapped up with his sabbatical response to social inequity (Ps. 12:5; 34:6; 68:5; 113:7; 146:9).

Sabbath instructions did not create a social utopia in ancient Israel, but they enjoin—as a divine priority—systemic action for social equity and economic justice as a remedy to economic inequality.

In the New Testament, the nature and focus of the weekly Sabbath observance became a point of contention in the ministry of Jesus, but he did not call for Sabbath practice to cease (Mark 2:23–3:6; Luke 13:10–17; 14:1–6; John 5:1–18). Rather than observing what had become ritual avoidance of taboos for a day, Jesus put the focus back on the liberative intention of the Sabbath institutions.

The contrast is striking in the story of the hungry disciples who began to pluck heads of grain and to eat in the fields on the Sabbath (Matt. 12:1–8), partaking in just the sort of foraging activity (not reaping for storage or sale) that characterized shared living on the land during sabbatical years. And the use by Jesus in Luke 13:12, 16 of language of release to describe his healing ministry only reinforces his citation of Sabbath-Jubilee language from Isaiah 61:1–2 in his inaugural sermon at Nazareth (Luke 4:16–21): "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (ESV). The social equity dimension of Sabbath is also in focus elsewhere in his teaching (see Matt. 5:42; 6:12; 11:28).

Paul's recourse to the sabbatical vision of the manna story was not an isolated instance of the living influence of Sabbath social equity on the apostolic church. We see in Acts 4:34 Luke's echoing of the sabbatical text in Deuteronomy 15:4 to describe the economic outcome of the Jerusalem church's mutual sharing: "There was not a needy person among them" (ESV). These references indicate that in their mission, Jesus and the apostolic church incorporated the social equity priorities of the Sabbath commandments. Other texts (see, for example, James 2:1–9 and 5:1–6) also evidence more indirect indebtedness to Sabbath provisions.

Sabbath equity for today's church and society

When Mennonite Church USA initiated its Corinthian Plan for health insurance for church workers, it incorporated a component that enabled congregations "with much" to subsidize insurance for workers in congregations "with less."[2] This is an example of the way that Sabbath principles of economic equity have continuing relevance to our lives today in our churches.

Sabbath principles of social equity and economic security for all are resources for Christians in our witness for the common good in our societies and in the global economy.

And just as other commandments regarding murder, adultery, fraud, and false witness have moral relevance and value for the social order beyond the church, so do Sabbath instructions regarding social equity. Thomas Piketty's *Capital in the 21st Century* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014) makes a compelling argument about the market's persistent generation of extreme inequality globally during the past two centuries, a pattern borne out in the United States in recent decades. In the US since 1979, even as employee productivity was soaring (it increased by 85 percent), wages in middle and low-paying jobs remained stagnant. Meanwhile, the top 1 percent of wage earners received 53.9 percent of the total increase in income between 1979 and 2011. The federal minimum wage in the US in 2015 is $7.25. If the minimum wage had been indexed to the consumer price index at the level of buying power it had in 1968, today it would be $10.52. And if the minimum wage had kept pace with the average productivity growth of labor (the way the minimum wage did from 1945 to 1968), that wage would be $21.72 per hour. Instead almost all those gains went to increased income and wealth for investors and top earners.[3]

The Sabbath principles of social equity and economic security for all are resources for Christians in our witness for the common good in our societies and in the global economy. Such witness from Sabbath principles could take the form of advocacy for a higher minimum wage, for workers' rights to organize in low-wage retail and food-service corporations, and for a financial transaction tax on high-risk speculative trading that doesn't contribute value to the real economy yet has a negative impact on the lowest-income households. Systemic protections for people vulnerable to poverty under natural market dynamics are an indispensable aspect of common good that Christian love compels us to seek for our neighbors. People led by the Spirit and teaching of Jesus, "who though rich, for your sake became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich" (2 Cor. 8:9), will want to put their love to work in economic practices and protections to seek a fair balance between the abundance of some and the need of others. Now, as much as at the time of the apostle Paul, Sabbath faithfulness toward God is a matter of equality.

Notes

[1] Unless otherwise noted, biblical texts are cited from the Common English Bible.

[2] See http://www.mennoniteusa.org/what-we-do/stewardship/the-corinthian-plan/.

[3] For more data, analysis, and Bible study applications, see Spencer Bradford and Josiah Daniels, "A Fair Balance: The Bible, Economics, and Justice for Workers in the 21st Century: A Four-Session Study and Discussion Curriculum from Durham Congregations in Action"; online at http://www.dcia.org/wp-content/uploads/FairBalanceForWorkerJusticeDCIA-Full.pdf.

About the author

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A Sabbath rest remains

Finding hope in the face of ecological crisis

Katerina Friesen

Imagine a distant descendant of yours, alive on Earth seven generations from now. Do you have an image in your head? Now imagine that she faces you and asks, "Ancestor, I have been told about the difficult times in which you lived, with wars and preparations for war, hunger and homelessness, the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer, poisons in the seas and soil and air, the dying of many species. It is hard to believe. Was that really true? Tell me. What was it like for you to live in the midst of that?" So began a series of questions from the future during an imaginative exercise that a friend and I recently tried during our weekly prayer and meditation time.[1]

> **How can hope for a present and future Sabbath rest for all creation (as described in Hebrews 3:1–4:11) inform our faith in the midst of today's intersecting ecological and economic crises?**

My friend's final inquiry during our exercise gave me pause: "Ancestor, where did you find the strength and joy to continue in your work, despite all the obstacles and discouragements?" I sat in silence for a long time before a confessional answer welled up in me: "I believe in a God who makes a way out of no way!" Tears suddenly came to my eyes. "But sometimes, when I look honestly at our present realities, I find it so hard to find hope that God will make a way."

How *do* we find hope that God is making all things new? In the same way that during our reflective exercise my "descendant" wondered what it was like to live during these times, I now turn to our faith ancestors in scripture. What inspired their belief in the midst of difficult times and assaults on their hope? In this article, I consider the Sabbath rest described in Hebrews 3:1–4:11 by one ancestor in faith, and ask how hope for a present and future Sabbath rest for all creation can inform our faith in the midst of today's intersecting ecological and economic crises.

Hebrews 3:1–4:11 and Sabbath rest

The book of Hebrews was written sometime between 65 and 100 CE by an anonymous author. The recipients, likely Jewish converts who continued to meet in the synagogue, were undergoing a "crisis of commitment."[2] Jesus had promised to return, but the expected *parousia* had not come. What did it mean to be a Christian disciple when the resurrected Christ was not with them physically and they were enduring persecution, or at least living in a Greco-Roman culture unsupportive of their Christian faith? The author of Hebrews wrote this "word of exhortation" (13:22) to encourage the converts' faith.[3]

The people of God set up camp on the border of Canaan, on the verge of coming into a place of rest, but they believed a bad report and refused to enter the promised land. So close, and yet they turned away.

In Hebrews 3:1–4:11 Sabbath rest is a major theme the author uses in his exhortation. The author places his encouragement to enter God's Sabbath rest in the context of Israel's opportunity to enter the promised land (Numbers 14–15), as described by the psalmist in Psalm 95. Much of Hebrews 3 is an exposition of Psalm 95, a psalm that would have been familiar to Jewish converts because it is read in synagogues every Friday as part of the liturgy welcoming *Shabbat*.[4] It is to the intertextual layering of Hebrews 3, Psalm 95, and Numbers 14–15 that we now turn.

Hebrews 3:7–11 quotes the Septuagint version of Psalm 95:7b–11, an account of Numbers 14–15, which tells of how the Israelites stopped at Kadesh and failed to enter the promised land:

> *Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says,*
> *"Today, if you hear his voice,*
> *do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion,*
> *as on the day of testing in the wilderness,*
> *where your ancestors put me to the test,*
> *though they had seen my works for forty years.*
> *Therefore I was angry with that generation,*
> *and I said, 'They always go astray in their hearts,*
> *and they have not known my ways.'*
> *As in my anger I swore,*
> *'They will not enter my rest.' "*[5]

Numbers 14 was a low point in the history of the people of God.[6] After escaping Egypt, crossing through the Red Sea, and journeying through the wilderness for forty years, they set up camp on the border of Canaan, on the verge of coming into a place of rest, but they believed a bad report and refused to enter the promised land. So close, and yet they turned away!

Interpreting *today* today

Despite the Israelites' disobedience, the promise of rest remains! The word *today* is the key that unlocks our understanding of Sabbath rest in Hebrews 3:1–4:11. The author of Hebrews again and again emphasizes the word *today* from Psalm 95:7b, exhorting his readers not to turn away, because the Sabbath rest "still remains for the people of God" (Heb. 4:9). *Today* is thus an ever-present opening to the in-breaking future of God's rest.

Today can be understood eschatologically—that is, through God's work outside history breaking into the present creation. Today is a *kairos* time—an urgent, critical time that demands decision, faith, and action. The passage above weaves together three interrelated times: the past time of Joshua and those who rebelled in the desert, the promise of rest renewed in the Psalms, and God's continued saving action in the present.[7] Christ, the new Moses who is faithful and obedient (Heb. 3:1–6), makes entry into God's rest possible *today*.

Sabbath rest is salvation, the archetypal movement from wilderness to promised land. It is the indwelling presence of God in creation, overcoming death and evil, already experienced in Christ's resurrection.

Understood in light of the eschatological today, what the author means by Sabbath rest is something we can now begin to approach. Sabbath rest is salvation, the archetypal movement from wilderness to promised land. It is the indwelling presence of God in creation, overcoming death and evil, already experienced in Christ's resurrection. This Sabbath rest can be experienced now and in the future, and it is always available to those who are faithful through Christ.[8]

Creation as house

I propose an ecological interpretation of Hebrews 3:1–4:11 for *today* that extends creation from the people of God (4:9) to all other parts of the household of God's creation: rivers, animals, plants, and more. The word *house* is a word ample enough to encompass the human and nonhuman realm. Hebrews 3:6 says, "Christ, however, was faithful over God's *house* as a son, and we are his *house* if we hold firm the confidence and the pride that belong to hope" (my italics). This verse refers to the people who hold firm in hope as God's house. Yet the book of Hebrews also uses the Greek word for house—*oikia*—in a range of meanings, including building, Israel, family, God's tabernacle, heaven, and creation.[9]

Our modern English words *economy* and *ecology* both stem from the root word *oikos*, and I believe that if our earth is to flourish, these two terms, too long disconnected, must be reconciled.

Our modern English words *economy* and *ecology* both stem from the root word *oikos*, and I believe that if our earth is to flourish, these two terms, too long disconnected, must be reconciled. What new understandings might emerge from the perspective of creation as a household, our basic economic unit? Christ who is the head of the house and its goal (Heb. 1:2; Col. 1:16) may also be seen as creation's indwelling homemaker. Christ is at work making our house a home, a place fit for all creatures to dwell in, in safety. Christ is ensuring food and provision for the whole household. But rot threatens the structures of the house, undermining the renovating efforts of the homemaker. Sickness afflicts its inhabitants. Indeed, given our present *oikos*-crisis, it would not be overly dramatic to say with some environmental ethicists that ours is a house on fire.[10]

A Sabbath rest for all creation

If we can read Hebrews 3:1–4:11 ecologically as a word for the household of all creation *today*, what might the promise of Sabbath rest mean for our time? The Jewish mindset, underlying the writings of the first-century writer of Hebrews, was deeply ecological. Seeing land-based principles behind the Sabbath, then, is not a new understanding but a rediscovery of an ancient one. Most readers will already be familiar with the redistributive economic principles of the Jubilee tradition, which radically disrupted society's tendencies toward accumulation and exploitation. Seen in light of Jubilee, Sabbath rest includes economic redistribution, freedom from bondage to debt and slavery, and rest for the land from its bondage to productivity.[11]

A second, related understanding of Sabbath is that it is an end to work. In Genesis 2:2, which Hebrews 3:4 cites, God finishes the labor of creation and rests on the seventh day. But in contrast to the other six days, this seventh day has no evening, no end. For this reason, some rabbinic traditions have interpreted Sabbath as the final end or goal of creation itself.

Sabbath and restorative labor

Jesus throws a wrench in the "no work" interpretation of the seventh day. He worked on the Sabbath by healing people and picking grain to eat with his disciples. I see Jesus's actions as reinterpreting the Sabbath tradition of rest from work in a way different from the interpretation of the scribes and Pharisees. His work is not burdensome; it is restorative labor, work that contributes to life and shalom for all.

If the Sabbath is creation's end goal and Jesus worked on the Sabbath, how then might our own daily living be restorative and not destructive? How might we see the Sabbath rest promised to us *today* not as an everlasting retirement in the clouds but as everlasting life as co-creators—or "partners" (Heb. 3:14)—with Christ in the renewal of God's creation?

Jesus's actions reinterpret the Sabbath tradition of rest from work. His work is not burdensome; it is restorative labor, work that contributes to life and shalom for all.

Gopal Dayaneni, an organizer with Movement Generation, an Oakland-based environmental justice collective, speaks about the need for restorative labor. Movement Generation sees the separation, degradation, and enslavement of our work to the industrial growth economy as the central cause of climate change. He says:

> *It's the exploitation, the extraction of our own work from the web of life and subordinating it to the chains of the market, that [has] created the conditions that we now are up against. It's that pool of carbon that's been wielded like a chainsaw against the rest of the natural world and has made [possible] the unleashing of oil, of fossil fuels, of*

> *industrial development, of all of these things on the world.*[12]

Sabbath worship

A vision of Sabbath rest calls us to re-place and reintegrate our work within the web of life. I believe that worship must be part of this shift, returning us as humans to right relations. Praise and gratitude are radical acts, acknowledging God as the center of our universe, the giver of life abundant. Worship engenders awe, love, and contentment, all of which dethrone the wanton waste, avarice, and restless discontent formed in us by our scarcity-driven market economy. Through our collective gratitude, we enjoy the gifts God has given us in creation, gifts that are good in and of themselves, gifts we cannot somehow improve by technological means. Praise stretches our imaginations to reject the status quo as our only possible future, and it readies us for entrance into God's Sabbath.

A vision of Sabbath rest calls us to re-place and reintegrate our work within the web of life. Worship must be part of this shift, returning us as humans to right relations. Praise and gratitude are radical acts, acknowledging God as the center of our universe, the giver of life abundant.

Worship also softens our hearts. Remember what the psalmist said about the hearts of those who failed to enter the promised land (Ps. 95:7b)? They were hard, like the stone-cold heart of Pharaoh in his refusal to liberate the people. In Hebrews 3:1–4:11, hard hearts are connected to disobedience and unbelief.[13] We might say that soft hearts (orthopathy), obedience (orthopraxy), and faithful belief (orthodoxy) are all connected! Thus, our ethics and our worship must be integrated in order for us to enter into the Sabbath rest, where we may deeply enjoy the renewed world with God forever.

Maintaining confidence in the God who makes a way

As much as we are poised on the precipice of irreversible destruction in this era that's been called the Anthropocene, marked by human-caused mass extinction of life, I am confident that we are also standing at the edge of what some have called the Great Turning. Today is indeed a *kairos* time. The question remains, will we be able to enter rightly into what people have described as the Beloved Community, the Great Economy, and the Community of Creation?

The Holy Spirit tells us that the *today* of Sabbath rest remains, and the Spirit reminds us not to harden our hearts and turn away from this promise: “But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called ‘today,’ so that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. For we have become partners of Christ, if only we hold our first confidence firm to the end” (3:13–14). The phrase “first confidence” (v. 14) can also be translated as “initial resolve,” which calls for the continuing life of faith. This is the life of discipleship and also of decisive action. It takes a good deal of this initial resolve to turn away from death and toward life, and to join Christ in making a restful home out of a household that has been turned into a factory.

When my friend asked, “Ancestor, where did you find the strength and joy to continue in your work, despite all the obstacles and discouragements?” I confessed, “I believe in a God who makes a way out of no way! But sometimes, I find it so hard to find hope that God will make a way when I look honestly at our present realities.” My friend listened to my confession, and he replied: “I have heard it said that when Moses and the people came to the waters, with the sea in front and Pharaoh’s army behind, the waters did not part right away. They had to step into the water, first up to their ankles, and then up to their knees. . . . It wasn’t until the waters finally reached their noses that God separated the waters.”

I don’t know how these rising waters are going to part. But let us not lose our initial resolve. Let us make every effort to enter! May the God who makes a way out of no way give us the faith, hope, and confidence to step into the waters and enter the Sabbath rest that still remains.

Notes

[1] Joanna Macy and Molly Young Brown, *Coming Back to Life: Practices to Reconnect our Lives, Our World* (Gabriola Island, BC: New Society Publishers, 1998).

[2] Edgar McKnight and Christopher Church, *Hebrews-James*, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Pub., 2004), 13.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid, 107.

[5] Scripture quotations are from the NRSV.

[6] Ibid., 99.

[7] Ibid., 100–101.

[8] The theology of Jürgen Moltmann has been helpful to me in understanding an eschatological framework for Sabbath and creation.

[9] Fred B. Craddock et al., *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 12: *The Letter to the Hebrews, the Letter of James, the First and Second Letters of Peter, the First, Second, and Third Letters of John, the Letter of Jude, the Book of Revelation* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1998), 46.

[10] Mary DeMocker, "If Your House Is on Fire: Kathleen Dean Moore on the Moral Urgency of Climate Change," *The Sun* 444 (December 2012); online at http://thesunmagazine.org/issues/444/if_your_house_is_on_fire.

[11] See Ched Myers, *The Biblical Vision of Sabbath Economics* (Washington, DC: Tell The Word Press, 2001).

[12] Gopal Dayaneni of the Movement Generation Justice and Ecology Project, Organizing for Resilience; Oakland, October 10, 2013; online at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aL9R4CG1I-U#t=2311 (37:00–38:30).

[13] "Disobedience" and "unbelief" are both derived from same Greek root, *apisteō*, and are used interchangeably. See Craddock et al., *New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 12: 50.

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Too much delight

Marlene Kropf

While waiting for an appointment, I picked up a magazine for business leaders. Two articles caught my eye: “How to Become Insanely Efficient” and “How to Build a Killer Team.” Scanning the pages, I was dismayed at the brutal tone. Who would be attracted to such advice?

For many weary and harried people today, a frantically busy, competitive existence is a fact of life. In order to survive in the contemporary world of commerce, technology, medicine, or education, they must become ever more productive, more sleep deprived, and more often absent from their homes and families. Setting aside a day every week for rest and worship seems at best quaint or perhaps unintelligible.

For harried people today, a frantically busy, competitive existence is a fact of life. A Sabbath-keeping rhythm is foreign to a world where stores stay open all night and computers and phones beep and blink endlessly.

Yet the Genesis story that introduces Sabbath paints a different picture of God’s dream for the world. Into the chaos and darkness of the beginning comes the first light. Day and night take shape, a rhythm of work and rest emerges—and then the Sabbath is created. It is a blessed day of rest, in which the Creator pauses to take full delight in all that has been made.

For the children of Israel, this rhythm of work and Sabbath keeping became the mark of their identity, their covenant relationship with God (Exod. 31:12–17). But such a life-giving rhythm is foreign to a world where stores stay open all night and computers and phones beep and blink endlessly. In his book *Sabbath: The Ancient Practices*, Dan Allender declares, “Few people are willing to enter the Sabbath and sanctify it, to make it holy, because a full day of delight and joy is more than most people can bear in a lifetime, let alone a week.”[1]

Perhaps the underlying reason so few take delight in the Sabbath is not just our frenzied lifestyle. It may be that our capacity for joy and rest in God's presence has been all but obliterated by constant sound and motion. A malaise so deeply seated will likely not yield to a quick fix. Simply tacking on Sabbath observance to an already crowded life is almost sure to fail. Without ongoing practices to nourish and make space for the human-divine relationship, people cannot be expected to consider celebrating the Sabbath a priority.

Tacking on Sabbath observance to a crowded life is almost sure to fail. Without practices to nourish the human-divine relationship, people cannot be expected to consider celebrating the Sabbath a priority.

So what practices are essential and foundational for experiencing Sabbath? Of the many potentially useful spiritual practices, two pillars undergird the Sabbath experience: silence and sacred pauses. If we desire to restore the Sabbath, we can begin by encouraging congregations and individuals to engage these two universal spiritual practices.

The practice of silence

The first pillar undergirding Sabbath is silence. "Nothing in all creation is so like God as silence," observes Meister Eckhart. And since silence is where God dwells, every faith tradition agrees that we must pause, cease doing, and enter silence if we want to encounter the living God. That practice may be engaged in solitude or it may be engaged communally. What is required is that it become part of the life of every seeker after God.

Gordon Cosby, beloved founding pastor of the Church of the Saviour in Washington, DC, wrote in his foreword to Elizabeth O'Connor's book *Search for Silence*:

> *The one journey that ultimately matters is the journey into the place of stillness deep within one's self. To reach that place is to be at home; to fail to reach it is to be forever restless. At the place of "central silence," one's own life and spirit are united with the life and Spirit of God. There the fire of God's presence is experienced. The soul is immersed in love. The divine birth happens. We hear at last the living Word.*[2]

The tragedy of human experience, however, is that many of us have forgotten our true home in God. As fugitives from our native soil, we no longer remember our deepest identity. Beyond and beneath the roles we fulfill in our homes, workplaces, churches, and communities, we fail to realize that we are God's beloved children, known and held forever.[3]

It is a terrible thing to be alone in the universe, cut off from the love at the center of all things. Being cut off makes people do hurtful and destructive things. We become addicted to substitutes for God: work, food, sex, glitter, power, violence—anything that will obscure the deep loneliness within.

What neuroscientists are discovering is that the practice of silence is necessary for healthy relationships to thrive—with ourselves and others, let alone with God. When we are not grounded in God, our ordinary awareness—instinct, feeling, thinking—is cluttered with trivia and clogged with judgments and negative thoughts. One spiritual teacher says that most North Americans cannot go three minutes without making some sort of critique, evaluation, or judgment. (If you don't believe this, try it yourself.) Such habitual, destructive patterns get in the way of authentic relationship. We cannot love God and others, cannot be truly present and hospitable, when our neurocircuitry is overloaded with debris. Our energy is consumed in protecting our wounds and shielding ourselves from genuine encounters. Caught in this trap, we lament with the apostle Paul, "I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate" (Rom. 7:15).[4]

When we are not grounded in God, our ordinary awareness—instinct, feelings, thinking—is cluttered with trivia and clogged with judgments and negative thoughts. Such destructive patterns get in the way of authentic relationship.

Contemplative practices change our brains. They create new neural pathways that enhance social awareness and expand our capacity for empathy. With a unique quality known as neuroplasticity (the Creator's gift for ongoing conversion), our brains use these practices of quiet openness to God to transform our old destructive, defensive, judgmental, and violent patterns. We stop talking *to* God or *about* God and simply *listen* to God. What we perceive renews our minds (Rom. 12:2), opening up fresh awareness and sustaining our capacity to love, give, and serve with abandon, without counting the cost.[5]

Could the church offer brief tutorials in silence in settings where most people are already present? For example, the ordinary Sunday morning worship service offers a spacious opportunity. In one Mennonite congregation I know, worshipers enter into a couple minutes of quiet reflection immediately after the sermon. A profound silence descends as children, youth, and adults pause to listen to God. In another congregation, people are invited to arrive early before business meetings. About twenty minutes before the meeting begins, someone offers a scripture and a prayer to guide these moments of meditation and open people to the Spirit's voice of discernment. Silence ensues until the meeting starts; latecomers slip in quietly and join those already at prayer. In still another congregation, a weekly small group begins with five minutes of centering prayer, a prelude to conversation about their encounters with God during the past week.

With a unique quality known as neuroplasticity (the Creator's gift for conversion), our brains use practices of quiet openness to God to transform our old destructive, defensive, judgmental, and violent patterns.

Introducing congregations to communal silence can begin slowly. A minute is enough to get started, with an increase in time as people discover that communal silence can be as precious and profound as singing together. With practice, people catch glimpses of the blessing of entering fully into God's presence—the heart of Sabbath.

The practice of sacred pauses

A second pillar undergirding Sabbath is related to the first. Just as silence opens our hearts and minds to intimacy with God, so the practice of pausing for prayer throughout the day tunes our hearts and minds to God's desires for us and for creation. It brings the spirit of Sabbath into the everyday world.

Sabbath might be understood as the great pause, the day on which we take a deep breath and remember God's deeds and celebrate God's faithful presence. Smaller pauses for prayer throughout the day can also renew our awareness, hour by hour, of God's gracious presence. Together, the great pause and the smaller daily pauses form and shape us as people who abide in the true vine and bear abundant fruit (John 15). They keep us from forgetting who God is and who we are, and they thereby transform us more and more into the loving, creative, and generous people we are called to be.

The Psalms speak of offering prayer at morning, noon, and night (Ps. 55:17). Monastic communities have historically taken their cue for the daily hours of prayer from Psalm 119:164: "Seven times a day I praise you for your righteous ordinances."

A remnant of monastic practice still exists in homes where time is set aside both morning and evening for scripture reading and prayer. Another echo of the monastic tradition is mealtime prayer, the pause to give thanks and make our requests to God before we eat.

The practice of pausing for prayer throughout the day tunes our hearts and minds to God's desires for us and for creation. It brings the spirit of Sabbath into the everyday world.

In her beautiful and inspiring book, *Seven Sacred Pauses*, Macrina Wiederkehr suggests that the monastic practice of seven daily pauses for prayer is not out of reach for ordinary folk. She translates the main themes of the monastic hours of prayer into brief pauses throughout the day.[6] "No matter what you are doing," Wiederkehr says, "you can pause to touch the grace of the hour."[7] The purpose of these pauses, she says, is *mindfulness*, defined as "the art of living awake and ready to embrace the gift of the present moment."[8]

Perhaps nothing so characterizes the ministry of Jesus as his capacity to live mindfully, to be fully present to each individual or group he encountered. To become like Jesus, his followers must learn and live the same rhythms of solitude and moment-by-moment prayer that Jesus practiced.

Not only individuals but families and communities can practice intentional sacred pauses throughout the day. I vividly remember spending time with a Christian community in Northumbria (England), entering into their practice of the daily hours of prayer and being challenged by the way communal prayer transforms the spirit of ordinary weekdays into Sabbath time.

Three things especially impressed me about the daily rhythm of work and worship. One was the energetic and joyful spirit in which work was accomplished, and how much got done. Another was how hard it was to interrupt our work at noon and go to the chapel to worship and pray. I was so habituated to keeping at a job until it was done that it took great effort to lay aside my tools at midday and walk away from a half-weeded row of garden vegetables. But the struggle to pause showed me how upside-down my attitudes had become. Did I really think my efforts would keep the world turning? The third thing I noticed was how refreshed we were at the end of a day in which worship and work had truly become one.[9]

One small way to begin creating sacred pauses in our work lives is to take a moment to bless the day before turning on the computer. Another is to pause at lunchtime to pray for peace in our communities and world. Technology might even aid us in making these pauses; an app could send us a reminder of these calls to prayer throughout the day. To pause prayerfully and breathe the spirit of Sabbath throughout the day prepares the way for the weekly Sabbath to become rich and full, a true celebration of God's goodness.

The practice of Sabbath

Having established two pillars on which Sabbath rests, we turn to look more closely at the practice of Sabbath itself. With its magnificent potential for refreshment and renewal, the Sabbath should be wildly popular and regularly enjoyed—right? Probably not, if one acknowledges the decline of Sunday as a day of rest.

Biblical scholars find a striking variety of themes embedded in Sabbath theology: rest, joyful celebration of creation, liberation from captivity, justice for all, the relativizing of work, the renewal of community, feasting and play, trust in God's provision.[10] The weekly day of rest is meant to be a blessing for both the human community and the nonhuman world. For one day we cease all our striving and trust that (in the words of the old hymn) "God is working [God's] purpose out."

Yet such astonishing beauty and peace are regularly bypassed in favor of driven and dangerous choices. In the face of our peril, Walter Brueggemann urges us to recognize that Sabbath observance is a bold act of prophetic resistance. He asserts:

> *In our own contemporary context of the rat race of anxiety, the celebration of Sabbath is an act of both resistance and alternative. It is resistance because it is visible insistence that our lives are not defined by the production and consumption of commodity goods. . . .*
>
> *It is an alternative to the demanding, chattering, pervasive presence of advertising and its great liturgical claim of professional sports that devour all of our "rest time." The alternative on offer is the awareness and practice of the claim that we are situated on the receiving end of the gifts of God.*[11]

Certainly congregations would benefit from biblical teaching about both the generous gifts of Sabbath and its countercultural potential for forming us as people of grace and peace. Along with such efforts, guidance for small steps to reclaim the Sabbath could be modeled and taught—practices that open our hearts to God and one another, making more space for awareness of God's presence.

One practice is choosing a special way to inaugurate and end the Sabbath, thereby setting it apart from other days. Just as Jewish families enjoy a candle-lit dinner as Shabbat begins, some Christian families serve a festive breakfast on Sunday to announce the day of rest. In our home, my husband regularly plays a particularly glorious set of recordings while we get ready for church. When I hear that music, my heart turns toward God and I begin to anticipate the gathering of the faithful.

Congregations would benefit from biblical teaching about the generous gifts of Sabbath and its countercultural potential for forming us as people of grace and peace. Steps to reclaim the Sabbath could be modeled and taught.

In his book *Sabbath Time*, Tilden Edwards describes the Sunday morning practice of silence his family observed as his children were growing up. After a special breakfast, each family member spent an hour alone before worship—the younger ones in quiet activities with a "Sabbath box" of toys available only on Sunday mornings, and the older ones in quiet reading, reflection, or walking. Adults read and meditated on the Sunday scripture passages.[12]

Then comes worship, breathing the generous spirit of Sabbath. On this day, God opens hands of grace to us, "satisfying the desire of every living thing" (Ps. 145:16). In the beloved community, we inhabit a circle of prayer and praise, singing of God's wondrous deeds and experiencing the fullness of God's gift of Sabbath.

The Sabbath is God's gift to us for our ongoing renewal and deepening. Sabbath is also a gift to the world, for when God's people observe Sabbath, the reign of God comes near.

Today, in an effort to reclaim the day of rest, many people are choosing to observe Sunday as an electronics-free day. Instead of listening to what's stored on their iPods, people make music themselves. Instead of watching television, children sketch and paint, play games, or take long walks with their families. Instead of working at the computer, people invite friends over for a simple meal.

Because few things enable people to get in touch with God more quickly than nature, an invigorating way to observe the Sabbath is to spend time outdoors. An afternoon stroll in the woods or along a lake, a bike ride in the country or a city park, or a pause to gaze at the stars in the night sky can refresh and restore us, opening our hearts more fully to the divine mystery. And lest we forget, a Sunday afternoon nap is surely one of the most blessed ways to honor the God who created a day of rest!

The Sabbath is God's gift to us for our ongoing renewal and deepening. "If you call the sabbath a delight and the holy day of the LORD honorable," the prophet Isaiah reminds us, "if you honor it . . . then you shall take delight in the LORD" (Isa. 58:13–14).

Sabbath is also a gift to the world, for when God's people observe Sabbath, the reign of God comes near. Neither an insane efficiency nor a killer work ethic is what the world needs or longs for. Instead, as Wayne Muller points out in *Sabbath: Restoring the Sacred Rhythm of Rest*, "Once people feel nourished and refreshed, they cannot help but be kind; just so, the world aches for the generosity of a well-rested people."[13]

Whether we are engaged with the pillars undergirding Sabbath—silence and sacred pauses—or the observance of Sabbath itself, we are participating in the world's healing. Nothing could bring more delight.

Notes

[1] Dan Allender, *Sabbath: The Ancient Practices* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2010), 5.

[2] N. Gordon Cosby, "Foreword," in *Search for Silence*, by Elizabeth O'Connor (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1972), 11.

[3] This awareness is what makes the story of Jesus's baptism so potent. Before Jesus has accomplished anything, before he has preached or taught or healed anyone, he encounters the unconditional love and blessing of God at his baptism. In the strength of that blessing he withstands the fierce temptations of Satan in the wilderness and returns to fulfill the call he has received from God (Mark 1:9–15).

[4] Scripture quotations are from the NRSV.

[5] For an intriguing discussion of current brain research and its implications for prayer and meditation, see *How God Changes Your Brain: Breakthrough Findings from a Leading Neuroscientist*, by Andrew Newberg and Mark Robert Waldman (New York: Ballantine Books, 2010).

[6] Macrina Wiederkehr, *Seven Sacred Pauses: Living Mindfully through the Hours of the Day* (Notre Dame, IN: Sorin Books, 2008). Wiederkehr suggests the following titles and focus for the daily "hours" of prayer:

Night Watch—Matins (pre-dawn): Deep listening, surrender, and trust
Awakening Hour—Lauds (dawn): Praise for the coming of light, resurrection
Little Hours—Breathing spells for the soul
  Blessing Hour—Terce (midmorning): Invoking the Spirit's blessing on our work
  Hour of Illumination—Sext (midday): Prayers for peace and healing in the world
  Hour of Wisdom—None (midafternoon): Confession and forgiveness
Twilight Hour—Vespers (evensong): Gratitude and praise
Great Silence—Compline (night): Trust, intimacy, completion

[7] Ibid., 2.

[8] Ibid.

[9] For more information about the daily prayer practice of the Northumbria Community, see *Celtic Daily Prayer: Prayers and Readings from the Northumbria Community* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2002).

[10] In *Keeping the Sabbath Wholly* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), Marva J. Dawn summarizes these themes as ceasing, resting, embracing, and feasting.

[11] Walter Brueggemann, *Sabbath as Resistance: Saying No to the Culture of Now* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), xiii–xiv.

[12] Tilden Edwards, *Sabbath Time: Understanding and Practice for Contemporary Christians* (New York: Seabury Press, 1982), 102–4.

[13] Wayne Muller, *Sabbath: Restoring the Sacred Rhythm of Rest* (New York: Bantam Books, 1999), 11.

About the author

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Family Sabbath practice

Carrie Martens

When I was a child, our family kept the Sabbath. We did not keep it in any particular way, although there were some activities that happened only on Sundays and never on weekdays. One of these was a light Sunday supper, which Russian Mennonites traditionally referred to as *faspa*. At times we went visiting, but at other times I had extra-long figure-skating practices that could not conveniently be held during the busy work/school week. Generally, the Sabbath was a space, more or less. It was a space that we kept open, at least most of the time, for something that was not part of our weekday space.

The Bible invites and instruct us to create a Sabbath space that is different, a space that is set apart. But set apart for what?

The Bible does indeed invite and instruct us to create space. We are told to remember the Sabbath, to keep it holy, not to work, but to rest. In short, to create a space that is different, a space that is set apart. But set apart for what? This I believe was the struggle of navigating the Sabbath for my family of origin. We understood that we should not work, but then what should we do? Was it permissible to do things that caused others to work? What did it mean to keep the Sabbath when one had a job that required shift work on Sundays? What qualified as work? And what did it actually mean to rest? Certainly going to skating practices was fun for me, but I am fairly certain that watching four-hour practice sessions was not a particularly holy and restful experience for other members of my family.

Scripture gives us what might be considered clear and adequate instruction about keeping the Sabbath holy. The people of Israel are plainly instructed not to work. They are provided with a detailed list of who should not work, from sons and daughters to oxen and livestock. And they are to remember. Israel is invited to remember God’s creative work—and more specifically, God’s seventh-day rest period (Exod. 20:11). And they are told to remember that they are no longer slaves in Egypt (Deut. 5:15). Thus we extrapolate that good churchgoing people in contemporary society should not work on Sundays; instead they should rest and they should remember that they are not slaves to their jobs.

Letting our children lead us

It is easy to read the Old Testament texts about keeping Sabbath with an eye to the concrete instructions and not to the impulses behind those instructions. It is easy to read with an eye to the law and not to the spirit of the law. This focus on the concrete is especially typical of our attempts to make these teachings clear for our young ones. We distill; we simplify; we condense God’s teachings into sound bites that can be memorized and understood. But I doubt that the benefit of this approach is any greater for the church’s children today than for my family years ago. We are left with the lesson that we are to stop and rest but with little wisdom about what that stopping and resting might entail.

And here I think our children can lead us. The Old Testament instructions about remembering the Sabbath are embedded in story, and few can delve as deeply into story as children can. Here is opportunity to imagine, to wonder, and to become immersed in the life-giving possibility of keeping Sabbath. The invitation to Sabbath is inextricably linked to creation, to God’s creative acts and in particular to God’s rest after creating. What would it mean to rest after creating sun and moon, stars that twinkle, fish that swim, skunks that gambol, and people who love and laugh with abandon? I am not a child, but when I consider the creation narrative, I wonder if resting might look a lot like delight, like the profound joy that grows out of connection and creativity.

The Old Testament instructions about remembering the Sabbath are embedded in story, and few can delve as deeply into story as children can. Here is opportunity to imagine, to wonder, and to become immersed in the life-giving possibility of keeping Sabbath.

The invitation to Sabbath is also deeply woven together with the Exodus narrative. What would it mean, many years after being saved from a life of slavery, to remember that day of liberation, to remember the mighty act of God's deliverance? I wonder if this remembering might have looked a lot like gathering together around a fire, sharing stories and objects that survived the journey, as an ongoing means of discovering identity, a means of being reoriented as people in covenant relationship with God.

For me, this is the spirit of Sabbath keeping. I sense that undergirding the law is an invitation to delight and to reorient ourselves week after week. This is an invitation that requires not only space but a spirit of creativity and discovery as we seek to be the people of God in our time and place.

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Receiving permission to stop striving

I do not mean to underestimate the daunting task of setting aside space in our culture. We live in a society that demands constant movement, constant production, constant striving. Finding space to stop and rest is no small feat within complex family systems. A gift I hear for us today is that we are not only being instructed or invited to keep the Sabbath holy but we are also being given permission to do so.

It is okay to stop. It is not failure to opt out of extracurricular activities or to say no to an invitation, even a good one. It is not failure to have a small birthday celebration with no Pinterest-inspired ideas. It is not failure to achieve less or to do less. In fact, it is often in doing less that we discover the space to become more—more whole, more grounded, more able to delight, more in step with the divine.

I wish I could say there is a sure-fire way to help families make Sabbath space in their lives, but I cannot. Making space for Sabbath is something each family has to navigate in ways that suit their needs, through priorities and realities that are particular to them. But I do think that having a sense of how we might conceive of Sabbath-keeping activity might help inform how we manage our time.

Considering focal practices

When I consider Sabbath as invitation to delight and to be reoriented, I am drawn to the work of Arthur Boers in *Living into Focus: Choosing What Matters in an Age of Distractions*. In particular I resonate with Boers's discussion of focal practices, terminology that he borrows from philosopher Albert Borgmann.[1] All of us are shaped by what we have placed at the center of our lives. Focal practices are activities that give us life and that share the characteristics of "commanding presence, continuity, and centering power," according to Borgmann.[2] These practices are not simply pastimes but experiences we need in order to live well.

Practices that include the characteristic of *commanding presence* are those that require effort. They can be strenuous and involve giving our attention.[3] Many of the activities advertised for families are about consumption, can be completed with little thought, and are quickly forgotten. We scarf down hamburgers from drive-through restaurants or take in movies at theatres or in our homes. Focal practices, in contrast, entail repetition and discipline, requiring more from us than mere passive consumption.

According to philosopher Albert Borgmann, focal practices are activities that give us life and that share the characteristics of "commanding presence, continuity, and centering power."

These activities include elements that are beyond our control, and as such, the practices do not have predictable results. Hiking, canoeing, running, gardening, and playing the piano—all these require focused attention, commitment, and energy, and the outcome is not guaranteed, which can increase our satisfaction in doing them. We may make mistakes or encounter inclement weather, but the process brings lasting enjoyment, delight in accomplishment, and increased understanding of our abilities and our limits.[4]

Focal practices are also characterized by *continuity and connection*. They have qualities that draw us both inward and outward, connecting us to various parts of ourselves, to those around us, and to creation. These activities help us unite our bodies, minds, and spirits, creating a sense of wholeness and well-being. They also affect how we relate beyond our own likes and dislikes, helping us avoid self-preoccupation and inviting us into rich relationships.[5] My nieces and I have enjoyed times of baking together, an activity that gets us involved up to our elbows! Through mixing cookie dough or forming pretzels, we connect with one another and also to the long history of food preparation and hospitality that runs in our family. We also connect with the tradition of farming and love of the land that is deeply a part of our story. Often the result is something we want to share with others, which is not always the case when we buy treats at the store!

Focal practices draw us both inward and outward, connecting us to various parts of ourselves, to those around us, and to creation. These activities help us unite our bodies, minds, and spirits, creating a sense of wholeness and well-being.

Finally, these practices have *centering power*, the ability to orient us toward something greater than ourselves. Through these activities we have the opportunity to learn important truths that can direct our lives, and we have space to breathe and remember what we value most, what is lasting.[6] A friend of mine grew up in a household that regularly allowed space during meals for laughter. They told stories and exchanged jokes, and they laughed until their bellies ached and tears ran down their cheeks. Mealtime laughter still is a focal practice for these children who are now grown and forming families of their own. Through laughter they let go of the stresses of the day, find joy in one another's company, and learn to delight in the moment.

Keeping Sabbath as focal practice

Worship is a primary activity that serves this purpose of centering or reorientation.[7] I understand that attending weekly worship can be a challenge for families who may be experiencing sleepless nights; working long work hours; and feeling overwhelmed by many tasks at home, by extracurricular activities, and by the demands of school. But we are oriented not only when seated neatly on pews in holy silence. Rather, we participate in the orienting and reorienting focal practice of worship through the intention to be part of that journey—the journey in which we walk, run, dance, trip, and stumble our way into the divine presence each week, whether in the pew or elsewhere.

Focal practices also have the power to call us back to ourselves when we feel scattered, which is a common occurrence in family life. A mother told me that each time her young son came home from kindergarten, she asked him what he had done that day, and each day he could not remember. One afternoon she volunteered in his classroom, and then she understood. The class was rushed from one activity to another, never completing a task before the time was up. By the end of the day, my friend felt lost too. The Sabbath invites us to stop and reorient ourselves so that we can find our way again. Focal practices can help us in that process.

Middle-class North American children tend to have lives full of planned activities. For such children, discovering focal practices that provide commanding presence, continuity and connection, and centering power may mean letting go of programs and plans in order to move more slowly and learn how to play again. It may mean leaving space for nothing at all, so moments of awe and wonder can break into our lives.

Practices that command presence, provide continuity, and center us invite us to enter into what gives us life, what feeds us deeply, and what calls us back to God and back to our true selves. Seen in this light, Sabbath—in whatever shape it takes for a family—opens a space for creativity and discovery.

I have noticed that children have a natural inclination toward focal practices. They will enthusiastically and at times stubbornly rest in God's presence, noticing a bug slowly passing by on a sidewalk, or glimpsing a rainbow. It is adults who seem to train out of our children this attentiveness to the minute and the profound.

In connection with keeping Sabbath, focal practices can be activities that move us to genuine delight and offer significant reorientation. Practices that command presence, provide continuity, and center us invite us to enter into what gives us life, what feeds us deeply, and what calls us back to God and back to our true selves. Seen in this light, Sabbath—in whatever shape it takes for a family—opens a space for creativity and discovery. In this space all the children and adults in a home can explore what gives them life as individuals and together as a family.

Such Sabbath space is an opportunity for parents and caregivers to notice what brings their children back into focus and what brings out their best, the essence of who they've been created to be. It is an opportunity for children to learn to know their parents and caregivers as spiritual beings with interests and passions, as people apart from their roles. It is an opportunity for each member of the family to see the heart of the other, sharing in what brings them life.

Sabbath keeping enriched by focal practices is a gift we can offer our children as they move into adulthood and start creating their own families and households. Through these practices our children can receive the knowledge that they are created for communion with God and that they can be drawn into God's love through particular practices that call out the core of who God made them to be. Through practices that invite us to delight and to be reoriented, we can invite our children into the life-giving ritual of keeping Sabbath.

Notes

[1] Arthur Boers, *Living into Focus: Choosing What Matters in an Age of Distractions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2012), 11.

[2] Ibid., 24.

[3] Ibid., 26–27.

[4] Ibid., 26–29.

[5] Ibid., 35–45.

[6] Ibid., 47–49.

[7] Ibid., 59.

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A Jewish view of Shabbat

An enviable practice for our time

Karen Soria

Herman Wouk tells about the time a Broadway producer of a play Wouk had written told him: “I don’t envy you your religion, but I envy you your Sabbath.”[1] I suppose the man imagined Judaism—the unenvied religion—as composed exclusively of prohibitions. But this busy producer also perceived that the Sabbath provides respite and renewal from the relentless demands of work.

Abraham Joshua Heschel many years ago wrote the seminal statement of the Jewish concept of the Sabbath—or *Shabbat*, in Hebrew—in his book *The Sabbath*.[2] Heschel’s poetic writing mocks the concept of Judaism as a collection of don’ts as he describes Shabbat as a sanctuary in time. His analysis has only gained in importance as technological innovation accelerates and contemporary demands increase and further impinge on our lives.

One way of reading Genesis 1:1–2:3 sees the work of creation as having been completed on day six before God rests on Shabbat; another sees creation as culminating with the creation of rest itself.

The beginnings of Shabbat

But the beginnings of Shabbat observance lie in a few verses from Scripture.[3] The creation narrative in Genesis 1:1–2:3 takes us from day one through day six[4] into the crown of creation with the Sabbath, the only day that has its own name. One way of reading the text sees the work of creation as having been completed on day six before God rests on Shabbat; another sees creation as culminating with the creation of rest itself.

The Sabbath is so essential to Judaism that the fourth (in the Jewish numbering) of the Ten Commandments deals with its observance. Exodus 20:8–11 tells us to “remember” the Sabbath, and Deuteronomy 5:12–15, to “observe” the Sabbath. The difference in words has provided fertile ground—understandably so!—for Jewish exegesis, as the rabbis of old (200 or so BCE through 600 CE) explored, debated, discussed, and finally recorded their thoughts on what one needs to do to remember and observe the Sabbath. In addition to Scripture, Judaism has volumes upon volumes of writings that came after the canon of Scripture was set in approximately 200 BCE. Scripture is referred to as the "Written Law" and the Talmud as the "Oral Law," although both include much besides what we think of as law. The rabbis of old took oral teachings and finally wrote them down in the Mishnah (fixed in approximately 200 CE), which became the core of the Talmud. Many commentators have added their thoughts as Judaism continues to develop over the millennia.

One of their starting points developed out of the scriptural details of building the tabernacle in the wilderness: all construction was to cease on the Sabbath, and the rabbis organized the tasks of construction into thirty-nine categories of work. Of course, times changed between the Ten Commandments and the start of the discussions, as they did between the start of those discussions and their end in 600 CE. And the discussions and debates continue in Jewish circles on what one may and may not do in appropriately remembering and observing the Sabbath.

By setting boundaries around what one cannot do, Judaism opens up a treasure of what one can do. At their best, boundaries make room. Shabbat becomes a day of rest, renewal, revitalization, restoration, repair, replenishment, and rekindling of our spiritual and emotional selves.

Boundaries shape a day to be envied

Now considering those thirty-nine categories of work that one is not allowed to do—the don'ts: how can they shape a day that is envied? By setting boundaries around what one cannot do, Judaism opens up a treasure of what one can do. At their best, boundaries make room. Shabbat becomes a day of rest, renewal, revitalization, restoration, repair, replenishment, and rekindling of our spiritual and emotional selves. We literally re-member ourselves, as we set aside the physical and mental demands of the everyday in order to refocus on the life of the soul. God's resting on Shabbat is described as *vayinafash* (*nefesh* is "soul"); Shabbat rest is thus a re-souling of ourselves. It is as though we recreate ourselves, in line with the Exodus verses' emphasis on Shabbat's connection with creation.

How profound is our need for such a time! We are continually bombarded with demands. Our electronic devices beep and message senders expect instant reply. Social networking purports to keep us in touch with family and friends—an admirable goal—but too often those notifications, posts, and worthy articles distract from human connection—to ourselves, our loved ones, and God. If we do not open the space in our lives for relationships, they will not happen. If we fill our lives with busyness, we will have no room for anything else. We lose touch with ourselves as human beings, if we become merely human doings.

Ritual creates a sanctuary in time

We open that space through the creation of a "sanctuary in time," to use Heschel's image. We construct not a physical tabernacle or other kind of place but an oasis in time, with leisure to think about how we live and what is truly important in our lives. With time to see the gifts that do in fact fill our lives, we thank and praise the Holy One of blessing. We build that oasis with conversation with family and friends, not about the business or busyness of our lives, but about what and who are truly central to our lives.

We beautify that space through ritual, sanctifying ordinary food with blessing and ceremony, through actions that are metaphors for values and ideas. We light candles and wave our hands as though bringing the light closer: the candlelight represents spiritual and intellectual light of the soul. Covering our eyes while saying the words of blessing, we then uncover them as though to see—truly see!—light for the first time. How extraordinary and wondrous the ordinary can be! On Shabbat we pause to see and hear, as though for the first time.

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Shabbat ritual frames the sanctuary of time. We welcome it with blessings over light (both the literal candles and metaphoric spiritual light), wine (or fruit of the vine, symbol of joy), and bread (hallah, the braided egg bread, richer and sweeter than the weekday dark or multigrain breads). The blessings are to be said shortly before sunset, and then the family—be it small, extended, "typical," or postmodern—sits down for a relaxed meal, often with special foods. Because the blessings at the start remind us of the gifts God gives us (and our responsibility to use them wisely and to share them), we need to say thank you at the end of the meal, again with blessings and songs.

Morning brings the opportunity for communal prayer and study, a chance to thank, praise, and glorify God. An afternoon nap is an important tradition in many Jewish homes, before perhaps going back to the synagogue for afternoon services and (in any case) offering the blessings to say farewell to the Shabbat, when three stars are visible. The end blessings complement the beginning ones, using a candle with multiple wicks, sweet-smelling spices, and wine. We thank God for making differences in the world.

Binding one day in seven in order to unbind ourselves

How profound: to bless God and to emphasize the blessing in our differences! This is a gift Judaism brings to the world. God loves our differences. But when we were slaves, we could not appreciate that. The blessing over the wine at the start of Shabbat praises God for two foundation points: creation and redemption from slavery to Pharaoh in Egypt. Moreover, we are told repeatedly in Scripture to remember that we were slaves in Egypt. If we remember the heart and the hurt of a slave, then we can never treat another as we were treated.

Slaves cannot pause when tired. Their taskmaster orders their schedule and commands their effort. They cannot rest; they have no luxury of time to reflect on their lives and on life's meaning. In addition to remembering Sabbath rest as the crown of creation, Jews mark another touchstone on Shabbat: redemption from slavery, when God freed us from being slaves in Pharaoh's Egypt in order to covenant with us at Mt. Sinai. Deuteronomy 5:15 connects Shabbat observance, history,

Slaves cannot pause when tired. Their taskmaster orders their schedule and commands their effort. They cannot rest; they have no luxury of time to reflect on their lives and on life's meaning.

and our actions in this way: "Remember that you were slaves in the land of Egypt and the Eternal your God brought you out from there with strong hand and extended arm: therefore the Eternal your God directed you to keep Shabbat." Every Sabbath—indeed, prayers at every Jewish service—harks back to creation and redemption.

How many of us are slaves to another schedule, set by work or imposed demands? How many of us, on our deathbed, will regret time not spent slaving for temporal gain? How many of us make regular arrangements to appreciate what we have and who we are, to discern our life's path, and to deepen our connections with the people and values that give our lives meaning? Slavery, as Scripture tells us and Jewish interpretation has taught over the centuries, is not a one-time or a once-upon-a-time event. Slavery is something we humans do to others—and to ourselves. To bind one day in every seven to the themes of the essential worth of every human and to the creation of the world—both of them God's creations—could, if we truly incorporated its lessons into our lives, change the world for better.

All we have is the time we are given

The Sabbath reminds us that all we have is, in fact, the time we have. Jewish teaching says: Make your time beautiful and meaningful! Rest and renew yourself. Become God's partner in creation, in the creation of a human being—yourself.

"So God blessed the seventh day and 'en-holied' it, for with it God 'sabbathed' from all God's work of creating" (Gen. 2:3).

Notes

[1] Herman Wouk, *This Is My God* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1959), 60.

[2] Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath, Its Meaning for Modern Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus, 1952). Heschel speaks of the "architecture of holiness" and asserts that the Sabbath is the Jewish cathedral in time.

[3] Jews refer to the Bible as Scripture, the Bible, the Torah, or most properly, TaNaKh—an acronym for its three sections, Torah (the Five Books of Moses), Nevi'im (Prophets), and Ketuvim (Writings). Early Christian authorities changed the order of a number of books in the second two sections. Also, authoritative translations for Jews are from the Hebrew of well over a thousand years ago (the Masoretic text), rather than from the Greek.

[4] While the usual translation of *yom* is "day," elsewhere the word clearly indicates a much longer span of time. For example, some verses and explanations in the Psalms, among other places, unambiguously clarify that God's sense of time and ours are not

the same. “For a thousand years in your sight are like yesterday when it passes by or a watch through the night” (Ps. 20:4).

About the author

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A pastor’s journey toward Sabbath rest

Rudy DIrks

I’m beginning to realize that my whole life has been a journey toward Sabbath rest. A number of more recent markers on this journey stand out most strikingly.

Discovering the blessings of being still before God

The first of these markers was in 1998 in Botswana. In the midst of ministry with African indigenous churches under Mennonite Church Canada Witness, I found myself asking the question, how can I learn to better listen to God? When I asked a friend, a nun, she said, “You have to talk to Father Julian.”

An Irish priest with the Passionist community on the outskirts of Gaborone, Botswana, Father Julian had ministered in the Kalagadi Desert for thirty-five years. He lived out of the back of a pickup truck, returning to the city from time to time to teach. For three months I met with Father Julian every Tuesday and Thursday afternoon for one hour of silent meditation. He said he didn’t know how to teach me to listen to God, but that he meditated and prayed every day for a couple of hours and I would be welcome to join him.

When I attended to the presence of God in moments and places of silence, I didn’t necessarily experience dramatic things—but the rest of the day changed somehow.

We would sit opposite each other in silence for one hour in the stone, thatched-roof chapel, which offered marginal respite from the hot desert sun. For the first couple of minutes he would tell me how he entered into the silent presence of God, and at the end of the hour we would talk for another few minutes about what the silence had been like for each of us. This experience profoundly shaped my relationship with God as I began to learn the spiritual blessings of being silent and still before the One who continuously and in perfect serenity holds all things in the universe together (Col. 1:17).

I learned that when I intentionally attend to the presence of God in moments and places of silence, I don't necessarily experience dramatic things—but I notice that the rest of the day changes somehow. At that point I had not yet recognized that this posture of stepping aside from the activity of ministry and life in order to "waste time" (to use Marva Dawn's wonderful phrase) in silence and stillness with God is part of Sabbath rest.

A Sabbath sabbatical pilgrimage

Another recent marker on my Sabbath rest journey came three years ago when my wife, Sharon, and I were able to take a four-month sabbatical from our pastoral roles as minister of pastoral care and lead pastor at Niagara United Mennonite Church, Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario.

Many years of college teaching, counseling, social work, mission service, and pastoring (all good and worthwhile experiences) had left us wondering how we could know the reality of Jesus's words that "my yoke is easy and my burden is light." When we were finally able to take these four months, we devoted our sabbatical to learning about Sabbath rest—resting in God.

Inspired by Arthur Boers's pilgrimage book, *The Way Is Made by Walking* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007), we turned our sabbatical into a pilgrimage (a physical journey with a spiritual purpose), traveling by car with a small camper trailer which I made for this purpose. We traveled lightly and simply, with no commitments or appointments other than spending time in communities where we could learn from others how to rest in God.

We began by visiting a Jewish messianic community in Brooklyn. We were graciously invited to experience Shabbat in a home, and there we observed the centuries-old traditions of the orthodox Jewish community. Key to this observance of the Sabbath is purposefully refraining from creating or doing any work on the Sabbath, in order to be reminded that God is the One who creates, and his handiwork is the universe; everything we do is simply a response to God's initiative.

We did this part of our pilgrimage with another couple from our church. When we came back, we experimented with a Mennonite Shabbat. We invited groups of about a dozen people to a

Saturday evening where we reflected on Sabbath rest and our faith stories. We shared a meal, a simple Russian-Mennonite *faspa*, which was familiar to most of us and simplified the preparation. What a novel idea, to begin our Sunday on Saturday over a Sabbath meal with friends, rather than starting it on Sunday with a jump out of bed and a frantic (and sometimes reluctant?) rush to Sunday morning service.

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When we returned, Christmas was approaching, so we treated our three recently married children and their spouses to a Taizé retreat at Loyola House in Guelph, Ontario. The retreat house had only single rooms, and it was a three-day silent retreat. We joked that our Christmas gift to our children was a family reunion where no one could say anything. This experience of Sabbath gave each of us a profound appreciation for a very different way of relating to each other—through the silence and rest of Sabbath. Try eating a family meal in complete silence sometime. We were surprised at how difficult that was. That experience of Sabbath has become a spiritual reference point for our family ever since.

Then we embarked on the main part of our pilgrimage, a three-month journey including some weeks at Christ in the Desert monastery in New Mexico and Little Portion Hermitage in Arkansas (founded by John Michael Talbot.) Between visiting these communities, we camped for some weeks in state parks in Arizona and Florida as we sought to incorporate practices and perspectives we had learned. We began sharing morning and evening prayers at our campsite, following the Benedictine patterns of using Psalms and silence. When we hiked in the mountains, we selected a biblical phrase (*lectio divina*) and walked together for hours in silence, listening to the Spirit. Setting aside times and spaces for being with God (which is the heart of Sabbath) gradually began to awaken in us a heightened awareness of God in everything all around us.

And yes, we went to church every Sunday on our pilgrimage. We decided to really push the envelope of our newfound freedom from routine by praying on Sunday mornings for the Spirit to guide us to a church, and then proceeding to try to follow the Spirit by going to whatever church seemed to be the right one. In this apparently random way we attended Lutheran, Methodist, Episcopalian, Catholic, Baptist, and rocking contemporary churches (the latter complete with dry ice and black lights in the sanctuary).

Two of the churches “just happened” to be talking about Sabbath rest the Sunday we visited them. In one southern conservative Baptist church the elderly pastor said he had never preached on Sabbath rest before, and he said the topic might be uncomfortable for some people, as he proceeded to quote Mother Teresa. In another church the pastor spontaneously asked any visiting pastors to come forward for prayer. Five of us came forward, and he proceeded to pray for us. He didn’t know Sharon and me or anything about our Sabbath journey, but he prayed that we would experience God’s Sabbath rest in our lives. We told him later how prophetic his prayer was. Just as I had learned from Father Julian years earlier, we found that when we set aside spaces and times to listen to God we didn’t necessarily notice anything dramatic in the moment, but things changed in the rest of our day.

Other experiments with Sabbath rest

Our sabbatical journey is now long over, but our pilgrimage continues as we learn more about the various manifestations of this wonderful gift of Sabbath rest that God offers us. Sabbath was woven into the fabric of Israelite life. At least the prophets make clear that it was meant to be, in their prophecies about laws relating to the seventh day, the economic and farming implications of the Sabbath year, and the financial and liberation implications of the year of Jubilee. Sabbath rest is meant to be woven into our lives as well. And it can be.

Sabbath was woven into the fabric of Israelite life. Sabbath rest is meant to be woven into our lives as well. And it can be.

More recently Sharon and I have been experimenting with Sabbath rest in more subtle ways. We have been changing how we eat, with less processed food and more natural food in our diet, and we have been doing some fasting. Over the past three years we followed a tight budget that enabled us to finally become debt-free the week before Easter, marking a Sabbath rest from debt.

We have become more intentional in creation care of our backyard in order to enable the land to experience more of God's Sabbath rest too. And whenever possible we spend time "just sitting with Jesus" (as Dallas Willard puts it). We are currently dreaming of downsizing in order to live in our basement apartment, and then we hope to build a "tiny house" in our backyard so we can enjoy a Sabbath rest from too much stuff and have more time to attend to God and to relationships with people.

Working at Sabbath?

I want to clarify something here. While I am happy to share my journey into Sabbath observance, I do not have it all together. Sharon and I often find ourselves forgetting what we have learned and returning to a busy, Sabbath-less life. And in our excitement about Sabbath rest and what it looks like in our lives, we sometimes find ourselves working hard at it—which of course defeats the whole purpose.

Once when we had shared our story and our excitement about what we were doing to incorporate Sabbath rest into our lives, a friend commented, "Sounds pretty exhausting to me." Perhaps that's why it's so important that we do Sabbath rest in community—so that others can help us when we get out of balance and don't see our own blind spots.

Sabbath and Anabaptist values

Mark Buchanan, in his book *The Rest of God: Restoring Your Soul by Restoring Sabbath* (Nashville, TN: W Pub. Group, 2006), makes the point that while the Sabbath is a sacred day and space as instructed in the Ten Commandments and the prophets, it is simply an expression—a discipline—intended to help cultivate a "Sabbath heart" for God. Reflecting on our calling as pastors and leaders in the Christian community, I wonder: what implications does having a Sabbath heart have for our understanding of biblical, Christian, Anabaptist faith? It seems to me that Sabbath rest resonates with some key Anabaptist perspectives:

1. Peace and justice are central to our expression of faith. We typically focus on peace and justice in relationships between people in conflict, which is good and appropriate. And certainly practicing Sabbath where we set aside time to be attentive to God and others has great potential for promoting relational shalom. But Sabbath rest suggests that peace and shalom begins within our own inner person. As we rest in God, we begin to know an inner peace and a reconciliation of our own internal struggles. "Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it" (Prov. 4:23, TNIV).

2. Community is another Anabaptist value at the heart of Sabbath. In our Sabbath pilgrimage we noticed that our quest to learn about resting in God drew us to communities that were practicing such rest. While individuals can find rest in God in private ways, full Sabbath rest requires relationships for sustainability, encouragement, learning how to rest, and gentle correction when we find ourselves drifting back to the old rest-less ways.

3. Perhaps one of the values most challenged by Sabbath is our work ethic. In my Mennonite experience, service and ministry tend to trump everything. Mennonites emphasize doing. This can be wonderful; after all, what could be more attractive than a practical faith? But when doing is everything, our activity takes on a dark side that is evident when we feel guilt about not being seen to be accomplishing something tangible, and when our doing is marked by a need to control and by excessive use of power. In such situations Sabbath rest enables us to learn silence and receptivity to the Spirit, to accept mystery, and to receive each other's gifts as they come to us by the work of the Spirit rather than just by our own strength. Sabbath, then, can be about the body, spirit, and soul being given respite from the struggle of ministry and the struggle of life itself.

At rest in God, source and sustainer of life

Sabbath rest teaches us our need to learn to not be in control, to not be responsible for the well-being of everyone else in the church. The Sabbath heart is a heart that is at rest in God. God initiates; we respond.

We were three weeks into our sabbatical before I could stop thinking about how the church was doing in my absence, before I could let go of my sense of being indispensable. We had agreed with the church that as a sabbatical discipline, we would light a candle every Sunday morning, wherever we were, and pray for them. And every Sunday morning the church lit a candle and prayed for us. Apart from these prayers, we agreed not be in contact with each other at all—no exceptions—for three months. In our absence the church handled some crises, including several deaths, and they initiated some things we only found out about on our return. For our part, during long driving stretches we prayed through the church directory for every member, not having a clue about what was going on in their lives at the moment. Everything turned out just fine. "Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord" (Zech. 4:6, NRSV).

We may change how we rest in God from season to season. And some aspects of Sabbath rest may become so precious that they remain ingrained in our lives for life.

The beauty of Sabbath rest is that its focus is on delighting in God, receiving his rest, placing ourselves in God's presence, and refraining from our own doing. The ways of exposing ourselves to God's Sabbath rest are as varied as our personalities and life situations. And the fun in it is experimenting with how God may want to bring Sabbath rest into our lives. We won't always get it right on the first try. We may change how we rest in God from season to season. And some aspects of Sabbath rest may become so precious that they remain ingrained in our lives for life.

Sabbath was made for humanity to find its place in God—and since God is the source of life, the sustainer of life, and the very expression of life itself, then resting in God can only be life giving. May God bring us, even now, to our destiny of Sabbath rest in him.

About the author

Rudy Dirks pastors Niagara United Mennonite Church, with his wife, Sharon, as minister of pastoral care. They get away as often as they can to hike, camp, bike, canoe, or kayak. They have three married children, and Rudy is delighted with his new status as grandfather—with all the treasures of the kingdom that go with it.

Preparing for an everlasting Sabbath
A pastor's perspective on Sabbath practice

Paul Mo

When I lived in Hong Kong and got baptized in my mid-twenties, I went to church on Sunday. I never thought about the Sabbath or what it meant to me or to the larger Christian community. After I came to Canada, during my first year here, I had to work on Sundays and I struggled with not going to church. If I was scheduled to work on Sunday, I would ask to work night shift or I would go to church on Saturday evening. Ever since that time, I realize that I cannot take for granted the opportunity to worship God every Sunday.

I visited The Mennonite Story in the Village of St. Jacobs, Ontario, and I learned that Mennonites traditionally closed their shops on Sunday because it was the Sabbath day, the holy day for God. Knowing about this practice triggered my interest in exploring the meaning of the Sabbath for Anabaptists, but I still did not dig deeply until I was asked to write this article about the Sabbath.

Biblical background

In the Old Testament, the Sabbath commandment is the fourth of the ten, but like the command to be faithful in marriage, the command to keep Sabbath appears in the biblical text before it appears as one of the Ten Commandments. Sabbath observance and marriage fidelity are mentioned already in Genesis 2:3 and 2:24 respectively. In Genesis 2:1–3, the term *Sabbath* is used for the seventh day, when God finished his work of creation and rested. God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it. In this we see that the seventh day is separated from the other six days. God is almighty; he does not need to take a rest after six days of work for creation, but he

God is almighty; he does not need to take a rest after six days of work for creation, but he modeled work and rest for us.

modeled work and rest for us. It is clear that God intended the seventh day to be a blessing to humankind, physically and spiritually.[1]

After forty years in the wilderness, Moses reminded the Israelites that God commands them to keep the Sabbath day as a special obligation (Deut. 5:15). In addition, Ezekiel 20:12 says that "also I gave them my Sabbaths as a sign between us, so they would know that I the LORD made them holy."[2]

The New Testament also indicates the importance of the Sabbath, as Jesus regularly attended worship in the synagogue on the Sabbath (Luke 4:16). But especially at two points Jesus came into conflict with the religious leaders of the Jews about the Sabbath. The religious leaders would think that the Sabbath itself is the aim, so the scribes made many Sabbath laws for the Jews to follow. "During the period between Ezra and Christian era the scribes formulated innumerable legal restrictions for the conduct of life under the law. Two whole treatises in the Talmud are devoted to the details of Sabbath observance. One of these is divided into 39 principal classes of prohibited actions.' "[3] But Jesus claimed that he is Lord of the Sabbath (Mark 2:28). He also taught that the Sabbath was made for humanity's benefit and that humanity was not made for the Sabbath. In other words, human need is more important than the law of Sabbath (Matt. 12:1–4; Mark 2:23–3:6; Luke 6:1–11).

According to *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, "The Sunday Sabbath and ritual worship thereon in the church are quite obviously a part of Christianity's heritage from Judaism"[4] But in fact the Sabbath day is the seventh day of the week, which for most Christians is not a day of religious worship. Sunday is actually the first day of the week. According to Franz Delitzsch, who sees the Sabbath in another perspective, it is beautiful to know the parallel "of the creative Friday when everything was finished, and the Friday of the redemption, when Christ died with the words: '*It is finished*'; that is the sabbath of creation and the day of rest of Christ in the grave, as bringing up with the resurrection of Christ the now prominent and deep significance of the first Sunday, when God said: "*Let there be light*.' "[5]

Sabbath renewal for our bodies and spirits

Many Christians regard Sunday as the Sabbath, and they have traditionally believed that Christians need to rest on this day and set aside time to worship God. This practice may have started in the first century because Jesus appeared among his disciples on the first day of the week and said “Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you” (John 20:21).

Early Anabaptists worshiped God in secret in forests, caves, barns, and mills. Worship gave them the collective spiritual energy to survive the persecution they faced.

In “Worshipping with the Early Anabaptists,” John Oyer and Keith Graber Miller write that our Mennonite ancestors—Anabaptists in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—worshiped God in secret in forests, caves, barns, and mills. Worship gave them the collective spiritual energy to survive the persecution they faced.[6] After reading this article, I felt that God’s command for us to rest on Sabbath is not just for our bodies but also for our souls. First Kings 19:1–18 describes how Elijah fled to Horeb to avoid having Queen Jezebel kill him. Elijah was so confused and so unable to see a way out of his predicament that he asked God to take away his life. God let him rest and gave him something to drink and eat. After that, God appeared to Elijah and gave him some new instructions. As with the early Anabaptists, a period of retreat and rest served as preparation for the challenges he faced.

Stories of two couples

I knew a couple who owned a small restaurant in a small town. They worked seven days a week and 365 days a year. They always said, “Time is money.” They said they did not need rest or a holiday because in their eyes earning money was the most important thing. Over time they made a lot of money and bought houses for their three children. Then they retired, and before long the husband was diagnosed with dementia and admitted to a nursing home. They had no more chance to spend time together enjoying the wealth they had accumulated. They had many things, but money could not buy back his health.

I have known another couple for about nine years. They were refugees, struggling with fear, worries, poverty, and hopelessness every day. With God’s grace and love, the whole family of five was eventually granted permanent residence in Canada and started their new lives here. They were baptized while they were still refugees. Their elder daughter was baptized when she was twelve. The husband worked in a restaurant as a cook. After the couple was baptized, their daughter asked her father if he could take Sunday off to worship God with the whole family. Many people in similar circumstances would have hesitated to ask such a question or consider such a possibility. After all, Sunday was one of the busiest days of the week in the restaurant, and this man was the sole breadwinner in the family. But this man went to his boss and told him that he had become a Christian and he needed to go to church with his family on Sunday. God's grace is far beyond what we can expect, and his boss did not refuse him. He let the cook take all Sundays off. For more than five years now, this brother in Christ has worshiped God with his whole family on Sunday week after week. I have been walking with this family in their journey for nine years already. They are not rich in things but are rich with God's grace. This family is blessed because they understood the teaching of God about getting a day off, resting, and worshiping God.

Is it lawful to do good on the Sabbath?

Seventeen years ago, like many new immigrants, I needed to work on Sundays to earn a living for my family of four. There seemed to be no alternative. Thankfully, God listened to my prayer and I found a night shift job to work from Sunday night through Thursday night so I could attend worship on Sunday, the Christian Sabbath. In 2002, I was called by God to devote myself to ministry. I graduated from Tyndale Seminary in 2005. I started my ministry at Markham Chinese Mennonite Church. I have a lot of opportunities to work with new immigrants and refugees.

Because of their social status and limited job opportunities, many new immigrants have to work on Sundays, and they struggle to make ends meet. So instead of just preaching at Sunday worship, I organized Bible studies and shared the gospel with these new immigrants and refugees during the week, often on Monday, which is my day off—officially. I agree with God's command that we need both work and rest. As God's children, we need to rest on the Sabbath and worship God in obedience to his command. Many people, like the scribes in Jesus's day, will judge these new immigrants and refugees for not resting on the Sabbath. Inevitably, the judgment of such scribes falls on me as well. But I always struggled with this question: Is it more important to observe the law of Sabbath than to bring people to God? To me, people's souls and eternal life are way more important than following the rules.

Many of my friends and congregation members have warned me about the risk of getting burned out. I really dislike hearing about burnout. We are called to respond to God's great love. Did we find our Lord Jesus Christ being burned out in his ministries? Did we find Paul being burned out in his ministries? On the contrary, Paul said "For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain" (Phil. 1:21).

Sabbath was made for humanity for physical rest and so that we can have time to worship God. I am blessed that I have been able to observe the Sabbath with my congregation every Sunday for the past seventeen years. With the psalmist I say, "Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me" (Ps. 51:12). I feel rest in my soul, *and* I have to admit that sometimes I feel physically tired. But I am not burned out. I think of how Jesus uses his blood to save us, and his great love moves and touches me. Serving God is the most significant goal and task in my life. Whenever I feel physically or emotionally exhausted, God's word recharges me with full energy. Most important, I get rest in my soul when I read his words.

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Preparing for an everlasting Sabbath

Sabbath to me means something a little bit different from what it means for many other Christians. When I reviewed Genesis 2:1–3, I noted that the Sabbath existed before the history of the Israelites. It is not first of all a religious practice in the Old Testament or a restriction for Christians. We can view the Sabbath with another perspective, a very positive one. Sabbath can be everlasting, and Christ is there for us (Heb. 4:9). In other words, we should not narrow our scope to focus just on the Sunday Sabbath; rather, we should look for an everlasting Sabbath as described in Psalm 95:11. We will have an eternal Sabbath when Jesus comes again. It will be the holy Sabbath I have been looking for. I believe it will be the sweetest time I can imagine, a time when we can totally rest.

According to the Gospels, our Lord went to the synagogue regularly to worship on the Sabbath. "For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 3:11). The Anabaptists understood that our faith should be made visible. Jesus is our model, because we are called to be his witnesses in the world and in our daily life. God created the Sabbath for humanity; God did not create humanity for the Sabbath. God's words are our comfort. As Jesus said, "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest" (Matt. 11:28).

Worshiping God on the Sabbath is important, but it is equally important that you worship with your heart, get rest in your soul, and be refreshed with God's words. It should not be a big concern if it is on Sunday. I worship God with my congregation every Sunday, and I worship with my whole heart and with my soul. Whether I strictly observe the Christian Sabbath is not important, because I know that there is another, everlasting Sabbath. We will enter the place of rest that God has planned for us. Working hard on the Sabbath in God's ministry to me is a way to glorify God and not a violation of the law of the Sabbath.

Notes

[1] Merrill C. Tenney, *The Zondervan Pictorial Bible Dictionary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1963), 735.

[2] All Scripture quotations are from the New International Version.

[3] Tenney, *The Zondervan Pictorial Bible Dictionary*, 736.

[4] George A. Buttrick et al., *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1962), 141.

[5] Franz Delitzsch, *A New Commentary on Genesis* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1888–89); quoted in *Genesis*, Commentary on the Holy Scriptures, vol. 1, ed. John Peter Lange et al. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1960), 192.

[6] John Oyer and Keith Graber Miller, "Worshipping with the Early Anabaptists," in *What Mennonites Are Thinking 1998*, ed. Merle Good and Phyllis Pellman Good (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 1998), 115.

About the author

Paul Mo graduated with an MDiv from Tyndale Seminary, Toronto, in 2005 and has served Markham Chinese Mennonite Church in Toronto as pastor since 2005. He is also a member of Mennonite Church Canada's Christian Witness Council. He is the husband of Monica Chung and a father of two young adult children.

An Indigenous theological perspective on Sabbath

Randy S. Woodley

Sabbath is a biblical concept long misunderstood and misconstrued. From Sabbath police still operating in the spirit of New England Puritans who punished violators of blue laws, to Christians who ignore Sabbath or reduce its observance to going to church on Sunday, people are confused about the true spirit of Sabbath. Yet our Scriptures stress the importance of Sabbath and offer instruction about its meaning and guidance for its observance. From this source, from nature itself, and from Sabbath parallels in the tradition of Indigenous North American peoples, we can learn vital perspectives and practices crucial for the restoration of our health and the well-being of all creation.

From Scripture, from nature, and from Sabbath parallels in the tradition of Indigenous North American peoples, we can learn perspectives and practices crucial for the restoration of our health and the well-being of all creation.

Biblical Sabbath

Some Old Testament scholars see the Sabbath commandment as the hinge on which the other nine commandments swing. According to Walter Brueggemann, the first three of the Ten Commandments differentiate God (YHWH) from the gods of Egypt, and the society God intends for Israel from an Egyptian culture of never-ending work. The final six commandments explain what true rest in God looks like. Brueggemann points to the stark contrast between biblical Sabbath and the production-driven rat-race culture of ancient Egypt and also of our time and place.

> *The fourth commandment looks back to the first three commandments and the God who rests (Exod. 20:3–7). At the same time, the Sabbath commandment looks forward to the last six commandments that concern the neighbor (vv. 12–17); they provide for rest alongside the*

> *neighbor. God, self, and all members of the household share in common rest on the seventh day; that social reality provides a commonality and a coherence not only to the community of covenant but to the commandments of Sinai as well.*[1]

The Scriptures also inform us that Sabbath is intimately linked to Jesus's identity. Jesus is called Lord of the Sabbath (Mark 2:28). He is our Sabbath rest (Hebrews 3, 4). And because at least five places in the Second Testament reveal Jesus as the pre-existent Christ (John 1:1–4, 10–14; Col. 1:15–20; 1 Cor. 8:6; Heb. 1:1–2), we can start to get our heads around the idea that it was actually Jesus Christ who created everything in six days (as the story goes) and then rested on the seventh day, the Sabbath. In other words, Jesus Christ, who created the world, came to reconcile the world—all creation—to God. Because we too are reconcilers, following Jesus as our Sabbath means living as Jesus lived, adopting a lifestyle of neighborliness, especially in relation to the most vulnerable and outcast people in society. Following Jesus means living in restful peace even toward our enemies, even as we inhabit a world that normally operates through restlessness, competition, and strife.

Discussions on Sabbath often miss its core by neglecting the relationship between Sabbath and shalom. To observe Sabbath is not just to set aside a Sabbath day or even a Sabbath year. Sabbath is indivisible from the whole shalom system in which it plays a crucial role. Scripture mandates one Sabbath day a week so that we remember that YHWH is not the god of greed-driven production. One whole day was set aside for enjoying freedom from work and strife. At the same time Sabbath is directly tied into commands to leave produce in the field for the poor and to leave the edges of one's field unharvested so that the poor can gather and eat that portion of the crop (Deut. 24:17–22). Every Sabbath (seventh) year, God commanded that all the fields were to be left fallow so the land could rest, and so poor people and wild animals could find plenty. Here we see again that God's concern is not just for humans but for all creation.

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According to the biblical witness, Sabbath after all was never intended to be just for humanity; it was intended for all creation, wild and domesticated, as the fourth commandment explains.

> *Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath of the* LORD *your* God*; in it you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter, your male or your female servant or your cattle or your sojourner who stays with you. For in six days the* LORD *made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day; therefore the* LORD *blessed the sabbath day and made it holy. (Exod. 20:8–11)*[2]

Notice that God generates all creation and then expects all creation to rest. Later Moses, repeats the fourth commandment but adds more livestock to the list:

> *But the seventh day is a sabbath of the* LORD *your* God*; in it you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter or your male servant or your female servant or your ox or your donkey or any of your cattle or your sojourner who stays with you, so that your male servant and your female servant may rest as well as you. (Deut. 5:14)*

Also, tied into the Sabbath/shalom construct is the cancellation of debt in the seventh year. This provision meant that generational debt would not keep individuals or families in perpetual poverty; instead the Sabbath year would create new opportunities throughout society (see Deut. 15:1–18). Every seventh year the playing field would become more level, and the fortunes of those who were poor and disenfranchised would be raised. Then, after forty-nine years, at the end of the seventh set of seven years, Israelites were to wipe away all debts, free all slaves, and return any acquired land to its original owners (Lev. 25:8–13). This restoration of their property would lift people out of poverty and make it difficult for the wealthy to maintain wealth across generations. The whole of the Sabbath/shalom system was designed to benefit the most vulnerable in society—widows, orphans, and foreigners, the very people with whom Jesus was also most concerned. Biblical Sabbath was not just a special weekly observance but rather a way of life with markers of days and years and festivals reflecting transfers of land and wealth in ways that restored resources to the most vulnerable in society. Those markers reminded the people who had covenanted with YHWH about the kind of God they served.

Natural Sabbath

Everything in creation has a job or a purpose. And the whole created order also rests at times from that job or purpose. Even those creatures we deem busiest, such as the ant and the beaver, take time off each day, ceasing from their labors. This time of rest is akin to Sabbath. All creation rests in order to restore harmony or shalom (to use the Bible's word).

In the first chapter of Genesis, rest appears after six days during which everything created is set in motion to be related to the other parts of creation. Even as all creation works together, embedded in everything created is a natural cycle of rest. Daily rest is a natural Sabbath; it is one of nature's ways of maintaining harmony in the world.

> *In the first account of creation, each action and each result of God's action is differentiated. Not one created part is the other, nor does it become the other. Each part of creation was made unique and after its own kind, special. And yet, each part is incomplete without the whole, and everything is being and becoming in relationship to and with the other. The writer of this creation account has given us a record of the most beautiful dance ever danced, the most engaging song ever sung, the most intimate sculpture ever made; and yet it is so much more than any one of these. It is the essence of harmony and balance. The celestials regulate the balance of the terrestrials. The night dusk comes to softly compel all creation to enter into rest and the calm brings about refreshing coolness to the world. The advent of the day provides new life and new opportunities like the embrace of warmth for plants, animals, and humans. The moon regulates all the waters. The sun regulates each season. The seasons regulate all creation on the earth and in the*

> *sky as annual activities; bears hibernate, and birds migrate, and people store wood and food for the winter and plant seeds in the spring. Everything created is in harmony and balance with everything else and with the Creator. The first week of creation is a grand picture of shalom on the earth.*[3]

Jesus pointed out creation's natural cycles through teaching about lilies, birds, trees, and other parts of creation. The message of Sabbath found within such teachings is that people are not to worry about material gain but rather to trust God for their needs. This is the lesson we too must learn from creation.

Indigenous Sabbath

Traditionally North American Indigenous peoples did not have a seven-day week. We organized ourselves according to moons akin to what we now call months, so we had no Sabbath day of the week as such. But the lifestyle of Sabbath had parallels in our existence. In general, Indigenous North Americans did not work except to provide what they needed at the time. There was no drive toward overproduction, no fostering of greed for more than was needed. The Indigenous ethic was one of cooperation, not competition. The wealthiest people in the community were expected to provide the most help for others, and the most respected people were those who gave the most away. To be greedy in Indian country was the most heinous of crimes; it was understood that greed is the seed of the destruction of everything sacred. One simply could not love family and neighbors and live in a greedy way. Instead, extreme generosity was and is a core value among First Nations.

Even today, a Cherokee teaching instructs that when one is gathering herbs and medicines, one should pick only every fourth plant, leaving the rest for the earth (for seed) or for other people. Plains tribes who hunted buffalo used every part of the animal and left no waste. Eastern First Nations did likewise with deer, taking only what they needed for survival. Although there are stories of abuse, excessive trapping and hunting for skins only came about during the colonial period, fueled by the settlers.

Here is a story from the Cherokee that speaks to the kind of lifestyle against which Sabbath protests:

In the old days, all the animals, birds, fish, and plants could talk, and everyone lived together in peace and friendship under the delight of the Creator. But after a while the humans began to slaughter the animals needlessly, becoming wasteful. The humans no longer thanked the Creator for supplying food nor did they thank the animals for feeding their families by the giving of their lives. Every traditional Cherokee has been taught that it is considered polite to thank the Creator and also thank the animal when it furnishes its own life so people may eat and sustain their lives for another day. So in order to protect themselves from the evil that had come upon them from the once grateful Cherokee, the animals resolved to hold a council to discuss their common survival.

The Council was first led by the bears. The Great White Bear asked, "How do the people kill us?" "With bows and arrows," someone replied. "Then we must make bows and arrows," declared the leader. But soon the bears found they could not shoot straight with their claws, and they needed their claws to dig for grubs and such. After much debate, the animals decided to bring diseases upon the Cherokee people. The Cherokees began getting sick and dying from these diseases. After many Cherokees had died, they pleaded with the animals, "Please, we will become grateful again and kill only that which we will eat." But the animals would not take back the diseases they had created to kill the Cherokees.

At the same time, the plants were watching all of these things. They watched as the Cherokee children and old people got sick. Then the strong warriors and even the women began to die. The plants decided to hold a council. In the council they agreed to provide medicine for the Cherokee. Each night, as the Cherokees would sleep, the plants would come to them in their dreams and show them how to use the plants to heal the diseases that the animals had brought upon them.

The Cherokees recovered and agreed always to kill only what they absolutely needed. They also agreed to say a

> *prayer of thanks to any animal that they killed, and to any plant that would be harvested for food or medicine. The Creator was happy with the Cherokees once again because harmony was restored among all that he created.*

Not only is the story an example of neighborly cooperation among all creation in order to bring about harmony, but it is a story of Sabbath rest. The human beings in the story came to understand that people can cross a line that moves us outside natural Sabbath/shalom living and into abuse, into a lifestyle of abuse that leads to destruction. It is because of the abuse of living things that we need markers that call us to stop and think about how we are living. We Cherokee had numerous ceremonies, stories, and festivals that marked and celebrated those times that led to a consistent lifestyle of Sabbath/shalom/Jubilee.

A festival among many Eastern Woodland tribes, including the Cherokee, is green corn. A friend who goes to the traditional Cherokee stomp dance religion grounds near Cherokee, North Carolina, sent me the following message about the green corn dance as a reminder:

> *The Cherokee Ceremonial Festival of the Green Corn Moon (which coincides with when the first, thinnest crescent of the moon appears after the "new" or dark moon) will fall August 20th this year [2013]. Celebration in the southeastern nations traditionally includes a lot of preparation.*
>
> - *Houses are cleaned but so are lives.*
> - *Gifts of your extra or excess are given away.*
> - *If you have more than one of anything—any duplicated item—you would give it away before green corn starts, preferably to someone who doesn't have that item.*
> - *Extra food is also shared with those who need it.*
> - *Debts are paid, and those who have grudges seek to end them before green corn begins.*
> - *Weddings are planned—and divorces become final before green corn's first day.*

- *It was a time of celebration—so to make room for that, it was preceded by a time of reflection and contemplation. So now these days we find ourselves in the midst of preparing for green corn.*
- *We are to prepare our calendars—clear time off to celebrate it correctly by planning ahead.*
- *We are to prepare our minds—start choosing to do what is right.*
- *We are to prepare our hearts—begin shedding ourselves of all that might tempt us to be miserly.*
- *We are to prepare our bodies—medicine is taken, bad habits dropped.*
- *We are to prepare our home—so our clan may visit and be welcomed.*
- *It is solemn now—but the feast is coming!*[4]

The emphasis in this account is on not collecting too many material possessions. Extra, duplicate, and excess things are given away as we shed temptations to become miserly. Along with the material things being shed are sickness, bad feelings, and grudges. We experience a general sense of restoration of The Harmony Way (shalom) in our lives. Sometimes the Cherokees refer to this kind of living as walking the "White Path." The idea is that when we walk in The Harmony Way in all our traditions, we are on a pure road or path.

In preparation for the Cherokee Green Corn Festival, excess things are given away as we shed temptations to become miserly. Also shed are sickness, bad feelings, and grudges.

For traditional Native Americans and for ancient followers of YHWH, it was these occasions—festivals and Sabbath days and years—that fostered a lifestyle of generosity, sharing with those who have less, balancing out excess in our lives, and resting in order to think about what is important. Followers of Jesus may disagree on the markers, but we should never disagree on the core values of Sabbath that have to do primarily with how we handle wealth and power.

Here are a few of the many questions we may want ask ourselves about living out Sabbath.

- Is our wealth (money, land, resources) being saved primarily to ensure multigenerational family inheritance?

- Are we using our knowledge and wealth to alleviate need among folks caught up in multigenerational poverty?
- Are we actively empowering and caring for the most disenfranchised and marginalized of our neighborhood and society?
- Do our notions of the sacred extend beyond humans to all of creation, both wild and domestic?
- How are we actively caring for the earth—the land—during the current ecological crisis?
- What are the times that serve as markers in our own life that are set aside as Sabbath, during which we spend time contemplating and celebrating the sacredness of living out a Sabbath-oriented, shalom-invested life?

Notes

[1] Walter Brueggemann, *Sabbath as Resistance: Saying No to the Culture of Now* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 1.

[2] Unless otherwise indicated, biblical quotations are from the New American Standard Bible.

[3] Randy Woodley, *Shalom and the Community of Creation: An Indigenous Vision* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 44.

[4] Email message from a friend whose name is withheld by request.

About the author

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The symbolic power of a consumption sabbath

Aiden Enns

Ideas and symbols are powerful. A community of resistance has at its disposal, with every act of consumption, the opportunity to change the world, incarnate love, and bring about justice.

In Winnipeg one day in 2012, some Christians wearing blue choir robes entered a great and mighty shopping centre, and there, unbidden by management, they sang songs. At first the employees stood amazed that something so fresh could happen in their aisles. But then some began to grumble because the singing was disrupting the process of commercial extraction, and a senior manager shouted at the singers and asked them to leave. The young choristers were amused at the disturbance they had created; it was life giving to them. They had transgressed the covenant between the lords of the economy and the citizens of the land. They had enacted a fleeting but real sabbath from consumption. They made a video recording of their actions and shared it to inspire others.

Using the power of ideas and symbols, a community of resistance has at its disposal, with every act of consumption, the opportunity to change the world, incarnate love, and bring about justice.

Jesus as Sabbath innovator

The Gospel writers tell of a time when Jesus and his disciples were walking in the fields on the Sabbath and became hungry. In violation of religious law, they picked and ate grain from the leftovers. Their action caught the attention of the authorities, who got upset. On another occasion, Jesus met a man with a shriveled hand. Again, it was the Sabbath and they were in a synagogue, under surveillance by the authorities who were watching to see whether Jesus would work on the day of rest. In full view, he transgressed the social and religious code of his day and said, “Which is lawful on the sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?” (Mark 3:1–5, NRSV). The Pharisees started to plot against him with intent to destroy him.

Why were the authorities so perturbed? Was it because Jesus and his friends stole mouthfuls of food from leftover crops? No, it is because their actions were intentional and symbolic violations of social codes that kept the leaders in control. In the name of bringing life to those suffering under systems of injustice, Jesus resisted those in power by contesting their symbols of control—in this case, their Sabbath regulations.

Why were the authorities so perturbed when Jesus violated Sabbath laws? It is because his actions were symbolic violations of social codes that kept the leaders in control.

The functioning of our social and political system requires a society-wide consensus. When even marginal people outside the offices of power contravene this consensus with symbolic acts of transgression, they invite response from the full and lethal force of the state apparatus. For example, in December 2014, an employee at a Chipotle in New York City held up his hands when nine police officers entered the fast-food restaurant to order food. It was a symbol of solidarity, a “hands up, don’t shoot” gesture popular with people protesting the police shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, a few months earlier. The employee was disciplined, and two chief officers of the company apologized to the police (according to an Associated Press story). One month later also in New York City, the preacher-actor-activist Reverend Billy Talen was at a demonstration in Grand Central Station. “I shouted ‘Black Lives Matter’ a few times in Grand Central Station and police rushed at me like I was a fiend.” He was arrested, held in prison, and later released.

“Those wanting to keep a social system unquestioned and unchanged find the religious imagination ‘dangerous,’ ” writes Michael Warren.[1] This is how I choose to read the story of Jesus: He was publicly executed to show what would happen to anyone who disrupts the smooth economic and social exploitation of the people. Into a community of finite evil and oppression he disclosed the possibility of a prevailing and infinite good. I see him as a whistle blower, a culture jammer, a truth-telling social agitator. He wept as he looked on the city.

In my Christian imagination, he still weeps for cities today. In our city we have people who live without a home, who go through the day in search of a free meal, who live with intellectual disabilities and receive inadequate mercy. Moreover we have churches full of rich and powerful people who do nothing to change the laws and practices to care more for those in need and enact policies of hospitality, wealth redistribution, and moderation. To be sure, we have legions of nonprofit organizations that seek to alleviate the suffering of others. But just as medics don't stop wars, our social services don't challenge and correct the systems that create suffering and displacement. I exaggerate, but the point is: we know we participate and benefit from injustice but don't do enough to acknowledge and stop it. Why is this? Part of the answer lies in symbolic gestures that destabilize the social consensus. For example, to the dismay of his followers, Jesus let a penitent woman soak his feet with expensive perfume. That symbolic gesture subordinated oppressive utilitarian values and elevated costly, boundary-breaking love for the outcast.

I have been disaffected by an apolitical, other-worldly, salvation-for-self, evangelical gospel, but I stay in the church because I want to join with others in following a Jesus who moved among the poor and disenfranchised.

I have been disaffected by an apolitical, other-worldly, salvation-for-self, evangelical gospel, but I stay in the church because I want to join with others in following a Jesus who moved among the poor and disenfranchised. And when he encountered those in power responsible for oppression, his nonviolent direct action exposed brutality and injustice, and gave hope to those in despair and opportunities to support liberation.

Outdoor revival meeting brings Earth Day to church

Our group of activist-oriented Christian consumers in southern Manitoba wondered what radical, yet relatively safe, action we could do to both celebrate Earth Day and disrupt the church's complacency in the face of environmental degradation. We had held a foot-washing service on the street in front of the government tax offices. We had held a service of lament, worship, and prayer at an oil pipeline station in southern Manitoba, a site at which Canadian oil is pumped into the United States.

We came up with the idea of a consumption sabbath, an outdoor worship service in a park in front of the provincial legislature where we as Christians and environmentally conscious citizens pledged to take a rest from consumption, with an aim of restoring a right relationship with the earth and its inhabitants. We sought to offer a range of opportunities for engagement. Some people were interested in civil disobedience, and others wanted to show support through legal avenues of free speech and right to assembly. The event started with a procession a mile from the park, with placards and an idol. Our "golden calf" was an empty oil barrel, spray-painted gold, which we hoisted onto the shoulders of four participants. It was a not-so-subtle symbol for how our lives revolve around energy consumption, how our collective economy relies on it, and how nations go to war in part to defend their access to oil.

We marched on the street without a parade permit. But because it was Sunday and we only took one lane, the mini-spectacle was more a curiosity than a disruption. I wasn't in the procession, because I was sitting at home at my computer. I was the designated preacher for the worship service at the end of the parade, and I was fretting about the final wording of my sermon. I live across from the park which was a meeting area for those who wanted to march a shorter distance. Outside the window of my study I could see the group at the second staging area.

We came up with the idea of a consumption sabbath, where we as Christians and environmentally concerned citizens pledged to take a rest from consumption, with an aim of restoring a right relationship with the earth and its inhabitants.

A couple of Mennonite churches in the area closed their doors that morning and encouraged members to bring lawn chairs and picnic blankets to the tent for the revival service. Everyone was encouraged to practice a sabbath from oil consumption as they travelled to the meeting. Some walked, many rode their bikes (and parked in a supervised area), and others took the bus or shared vehicles.

I printed out my sermon and hopped on my bike to catch up with the procession. In the spirit of the revival meetings popular among evangelical Mennonites in the mid-1900s, I wore a buttonup white shirt, black pants, a "Mennonite beard," and for flair, a bow tie. As I arrived a large crowd had already assembled. Under the red and white circus tent 100 chairs were already full or spoken for; on the grass another 200 people spread their blankets or set up chairs. The piano player was adjusting the legs on his digital piano stand and checking the wires. The guitar player, also a sound technician, was strumming a few chords.

The effort contributed to make the event happen was significant; there were tent-renters, chair haulers, musicians, conductors, choristers, ushers, bike valets, media relations people, church administrators, announcement placers, and a videographer who made a "trailer" for the event. My modest task was to read my remarks with hints of humour and compelling enthusiasm.

In advance of the event, members of the choir rode the transit bus in their robes and sang songs praising consumer restraint. In addition to singing in stores at the mall, they walked downtown sidewalks snapping their fingers to a refrain alternating between solo voice and choral echo: "O happy day / O *happy day* / O Lord, you wash / *O Lord, you wash* / my carbon sins away."

The service included three speakers who brought "testimonies"—following the evangelical tradition of personal and moving accounts of spiritual struggles and triumphs. A young man, DeLayne Toews, with leather-bound Bible in hand, declared he had been saved from his consumptive lifestyle by working and weeding in the garden. Annie Janzen, an older woman, exhibited a pot of soil with the bulb of a flower that keeps producing year after year. Christine Penner Polle, a woman in midlife, confessed that she used to avoid the topic of climate change, but when she embraced her new identity as a "fossil fuel abolitionist," she discovered a new sense of hope.

To conclude the service, ushers handed out pledge cards and pencils in preparation for an "altar call," an invitation for people to come forward and publicly demonstrate their commitment. Preacher: "What is on your heart today? Will you make a pledge? On the card you'll see a few suggestions to get you thinking: a digital sabbath, a junk-food sabbath, a motorized transport sabbath. Some of you are poised to take a big step. I trust that for some of you, today will be a turning point in your life. You say 'yes' to the spirit of life."

We knew from studies in social change that if people make a pledge and write it down, they are more likely to take action. We knew from worship planners that especially those people who are kinesthetic learners are likely have a more powerful experience if they can respond to a call in a tactile and symbolic way. People came forward and taped their pledges to the oil barrel.

After the service, the pledges were collected and shared with organizers. A postdoctoral researcher, Joanne M. Moyer, analyzed the 129 pledges; of them, fifty-one provided contact information for follow-up.[2] Pledges included: "Drive less, bike more." "Plant an apple tree." "Not enter the doors of Wal-Mart for the next year." "Take a junk food sabbath." "Leave the car parked at least two days a week." "Buy secondhand clothing for a year." "Cut up my credit card (once paid off)." "Three meatless days per week." "Talk to people in power." "Develop canning/preserving skills."[3]

Sabbath reappropriated

Participants in the service were doing two things at once: they were holding a church service and "playing church." They took the revival seriously even though they knew it was part parody. Organizers and participants were innovating with the boundary between church and world, between gospel and social action.

We sought to redeem entertainment from the for-profit sector and use it to provoke new patterns of thought and behaviour. We suggested that the biblical notion of Sabbath could inform social and economic practices of a consumer capitalist society.

A number of people asked me after the service whether we were joking or serious. Researcher Moyer sent a questionnaire to people who left their contact information on the pledge cards. "By taking a somewhat satirical tone in presenting the tent revival form, the planners also risked confusing or offending those who felt connected to this style of worship," she wrote in her report. For example, Participant 102 had difficulty interpreting the event: "The worship service was confusing . . . Was it meant to be worship? Or was it poking fun at a form of worship that some have found meaningful?"

The evocation of cognitive dissonance was intentional, part of the strategy for social change. We wanted to convene a large group of people with the lure of spectacle and the promise of something worthwhile. We sought to redeem entertainment from the for-profit sector and use it to provoke new patterns of thought and behaviour. We suggested that the biblical notion of Sabbath could inform social and economic practices of a consumer capitalist society. Jesus often confounded his listeners. Some of his parables are so ambiguous you could call them riddles or zen koans. He used common images in innovative ways to crack open new meanings for a people encrusted by the mechanisms of oppression. Actions are guided by thought patterns. Thought patterns can be disrupted, expanded, and redirected through the use of metaphor and symbol. Freeing the notion of sabbath from its biblical and religious tethers allowed new and persuasive imperatives to address overconsumption and greed in a society normally immune to messages of restraint. In my mind, that was the theoretical and theological goal behind our promotion of a consumption sabbath.

Notes

[1] Michael Warren, *Seeing through the Media: A Religious View of Communication and Cultural Analysis* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press, 1997), 192.

[2] Joanne M. Moyer, "The Consumption Sabbath: Considering a Faith-Based Initiative to Inspire Simplicity and Environmental Action" (paper presented at Toronto Mennonite Theological Centre Scholar's Forum, University of Toronto, Toronto, ON, January 28, 2014).

[3] See Consumption Sabbath - Revival Recap (8:02 minutes), uploaded to YouTube April 25, 2012.

About the author

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"Is it lawful?"

Interpretation and discernment in light of the Sabbath controversies

W. Derek Suderman

The Sabbath controversies provide a microcosm of extended debates between Jesus and Jewish leaders, the Pharisees in particular. Although these passages are familiar, Christians reading them often presuppose the self-evident truth of Jesus's position(s) and the foolishness or even conniving legalism of the Pharisees. However, recognizing these debates as contentious sites of biblical interpretation and ethical discernment holds great potential. Not only does such a shift in perspective uncover underlying dynamics at play between Jesus and the Pharisees, but it also prompts readers to consider the ongoing complexity of holding together a commitment to interpret the Bible on one hand and to live a life of faithful discipleship on the other.

Recognizing the Sabbath debates as contentious sites of biblical interpretation and ethical discernment holds great potential, prompting readers to consider the ongoing complexity of holding together a commitment to interpret the Bible on one hand and to live a life of faithful discipleship on the other.

Sabbath controversy in Matthew 12

Following on the heels of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7) and a series of accounts of Jesus's healing and teaching, Matthew 12 highlights the brewing conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees. In particular, on seeing his disciples eating grain, the Pharisees confront Jesus: "Look, your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the sabbath" (v. 2).[1] Jesus responds with two scriptural examples, leading to the climax: "I tell you, something greater than the temple is here. But if you had known what this means, 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the guiltless. For the Son of Man is lord of the sabbath" (vv. 5–8).

In case we missed it the first time, the next verses expand the controversy, this time with the Pharisees asking Jesus: "Is it lawful to cure on the sabbath?" (v. 10). What had initially been a slightly pejorative nudge for Jesus to correct his disciples ("Look at what your disciples are doing") becomes a question to clarify and even challenge Jesus's interpretation ("*Is* it lawful . . .?"). The narrator's additional comment—"so that they might accuse him"—raises the stakes still further, while the end of the passage underscores the dire consequences of this debate: "But the Pharisees went out and conspired against him, how to destroy him" (vv. 10, 14).

As Christians we have largely trained ourselves to simplify discussions between Jesus and the Pharisees by treating them not as actual debates but as leading to foregone conclusions.

Whether in a university classroom, a Sunday school class, or someplace in between, Christians asked to describe Jesus and the Pharisees here give remarkably consistent responses. Where the Pharisees are interested in the letter of the law, Jesus reflects its spirit; where Pharisees add to the law, Jesus reveals its purpose; while Pharisees are legalistic, Jesus exhibits grace; and so on. The contrast is predictably stark, with good traits attributed to Jesus and bad ones sticking to the Pharisees like white on rice.

As Christians we have largely trained ourselves to simplify or even ignore the deeper issues at stake in such a passage by treating it not as an actual debate but as leading to a foregone conclusion. However, adopting the former perspective is not only more interesting but, in my view, more helpful for considering ethical discernment in our own day.

Sabbath in the law

The Pharisees' confrontation with Jesus stems from the interpretation of the Sabbath commandment found in the "ten words"—or Ten Commandments, as we typically refer to them (Exod. 20:8–11; Deut. 5:12–15).[2] Although the language here reflects the context of an ancient household, with "you" corresponding to the male patriarch (you, your son, your daughter, your slaves, your animals, etc.), Waldemar Janzen points out that observing the Sabbath underscores humanity's status as creatures, since "it is through work that humans are most tempted to arrogate to themselves a godlike control of the world."[3] While the commandment seems clear enough, its interpretation is less so. When the

Torah—the law—says not to work on the Sabbath, the necessary question becomes: *What is work*? For (Gentile) Christians, especially those who begin with a "law vs. grace" mentality, this may seem like a legalistic question. But for Jews (including Jesus, Paul, and most if not all New Testament writers), this was and remains a key question. If the law outlines God's will for this people, then such a debate is not superfluous but necessary.

Focusing on this question helps contemporary Christians recognize the overarching *positive* perspective of law that permeates both the Old Testament and Jesus's teaching in Matthew. While we often pit law and grace against each other, the liberation/salvation the Israelites experienced in the Exodus from Egypt preceded and provided the basis for the law; in other words, the law is not opposed to grace but a response to and even continuation of it.[4] The beginning of the Ten Commandments reflects this link between law and grace by filling up God's name—"I am who I am"—with meaning: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt . . ." In the biblical period, following the law is the very basis of life, while rejecting it is the road to death and destruction (Deut. 30:11–20).

When the Torah—the law—says not to work on the Sabbath, the necessary question becomes: *what is work*? Discerning what this commandment means in practical, everyday life is not legalism but discipleship.

So it should not be surprising (or forgotten!) that Jesus underscores the significance of the law at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount. In fact, the New Testament emphasis on discipleship builds on the longstanding expectation that Israel should walk (*halak*) after the Lord and not after other gods (Deut. 1:30–31; 4:3). In effect, when the Torah says not to work on the Sabbath, discerning what that means in practical, everyday life is not legalism but discipleship.

Sabbath in Isaiah

Discussion about the Sabbath is not limited to legal material, however, and Isaiah proves particularly striking. After an initial rejection of the contemporary practice of the Sabbath in light of sin (Isa. 1:13), Isaiah 56 reorients this element in an unexpected way. Although this passage might not sound strange to us, this tends to be because we read it through a New Testament lens; of course foreigners can be included (contemporary Christians are, after all, Gentiles), and what is a eunuch anyway? But in its time this passage provided a fundamental reinterpretation and reorientation of the preceding tradition.

The reorientation of Sabbath observance is expanded beautifully in Isaiah 58:6–14, which moves beyond a debate of what should *not* be done on the Sabbath ("work"), to an active orientation of what *should* be carried out.

Within legal material, certain foreigners *were* excluded from the community (notably, Ammonites or Moabites until the tenth generation), and the sexually deformed eunuch in particular was inadmissible (Deut. 23:1–4). Isaiah 56, however, shifts the discussion by opening the community up to both groups, as long as they "keep my Sabbath . . . and hold fast my covenant" (Isa. 56:4, 6). This reorientation of Sabbath observance is expanded beautifully in Isaiah 58:6–14, which moves well beyond a debate of what should *not* be done on the Sabbath ("work"), to an active orientation of what *should* be carried out:

> *Is not this the fast that I choose:*
> *to loose the bonds of injustice,*
> *to undo the thongs of the yoke,*
> *to let the oppressed go free,*
> *and to break every yoke?*
> *Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,*
> *and bring the homeless poor into your house;*
> *when you see the naked, to cover them,*
> *and not to hide yourself from your own kin? (Isa. 58:6–7)*

More than simply reorienting previous tradition, however, Isaiah here also enters into a contemporary debate reflected in other parts of Scripture. Most scholars see in Isaiah 56 and following a postexilic perspective, often described in shorthand as Third Isaiah. In other words, this section of the scroll may well be approximately contemporary with the events described in Ezra/Nehemiah, where marriage to foreigners is seen as such a significant problem that it leads to a mass divorce (Ezra 9–10; Nehemiah 13). Intriguingly, the latter passage even explicitly cites Deuteronomy 23 as the impetus for this decision (Neh. 13:1)![5]

What we see, then, is that the kind of debate described between Jesus and the Pharisees is woven into the very fabric of Scripture itself. Of course, the New Testament builds directly on the perspective of this latter section of Isaiah, where the justice elements from Isaiah 58 frame Jesus's ministry in Luke (4:16–30) and the parable of the sheep and the goats (Matt. 25:31–46). What's more, the account of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch, in which the latter reads an Isaiah scroll in his chariot, also plays directly on the connection. For anyone familiar with the Isaiah scroll, as the New Testament writers clearly were, the mention of Isaiah and the baptism of a *foreign eunuch* embodies the potential incorporation of such folks described (and explicitly linked to Sabbath) in Isaiah (Acts 8:26–40; cf. Isa. 56:3–7).[6] Thus, Jesus is not the first to insist on a positive view of Sabbath rather than to focus on what not to do; he is building on a strong emphasis already present in the prophetic corpus.

Jesus is not the first to insist on a positive view of Sabbath rather than to focus on what not to do; he is building on a strong emphasis already present in the prophetic corpus.

Reconsidering the debate over the Sabbath: From legalism to discernment

Returning to Matthew and considering the Sabbath controversy in its broader context in the Gospel, we see it in a new light. Though the repeated refrain "You have heard it said . . . But I say . . ." is often portrayed as a series of opposites, the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount frames what follows as a hyperobservance rather than a rejection of law (Matt. 5:17–20). In a fashion similar to the rabbinic tendency to build a fence around the Torah (law), Jesus's teaching goes beyond the law to make its observance more stringent, ensuring that the law is not violated: if one does not get angry, one will not kill; and by not looking at other women, one will not commit adultery. When we recognize "an eye for an eye" as a provision that places a limitation on vengeance, the shift to "turn the other cheek" also represents an "even more so" in the same direction rather than a fundamental about-face.[7] As the Sermon on the Mount underscores, the law is not a bad thing in *either* Jesus's or Matthew's estimation.

Immediately following the discussion about Sabbath with the Pharisees, the narrator links Jesus's ongoing ministry with Isaiah 42:1–4, explicitly citing as "fulfilled" what lies implicit in the voice from heaven in both Jesus's baptism and transfiguration (3:17; 17:5): "Here is my servant, whom I have chosen, my beloved, with whom my soul is well pleased" (Matt. 12:18). This reference underscores the connection between Jesus's ministry and the prophets, already introduced in Jesus's own reference to Hosea 6:6: "But if you had known what this means, 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the guiltless" (Matt. 12:7–8).

Returning to where we began, we find that the Sabbath debate between Jesus and the Pharisees in Matthew 12 now looks somewhat different. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus consistently adds to and goes beyond the law. If extending the law represents legalism, then this term describes Jesus as well as the Pharisees. While neither party rejects the significance of the Sabbath, *both* are invested in scriptural interpretation; in fact, both parties recognize that ongoing interpretation is not problematic but *required*. Even the mode of argument—whether building a fence around the Torah in the Sermon on the Mount or moving "from the lesser to the greater" in the Sabbath debate (temple to something greater, sheep to a man)—resonates with rabbinic practice.[8]

If extending the law represents legalism, then this term describes Jesus as well as the Pharisees. Neither party rejects the significance of the Sabbath, and *both* are invested in scriptural interpretation.

Although the consistent and heated debate between Jesus and the Pharisees has led Christians to judge the Pharisees negatively, the broader context of the New Testament suggests that we need a more nuanced perspective on this group. Despite their consistent disagreements, Jesus and the Pharisees actually manifest significant commonalities both in perspective and in method for understanding Scripture. For instance, unlike the Sadducees, the Pharisees believed in the resurrection, which Paul uses to full effect (Acts 23:6–10); they drew on the prophets, psalms, and other Scripture outside the "law" itself (Genesis through Deuteronomy); they emphasized the holiness of the "laity" beyond the priesthood; they depended on influence outside of the temple system;[9] and so on.

Furthermore, we do well to consistently remind ourselves that Pharisees (that is, "Christians" who remained Pharisaic Jews; see Acts 15:5) were among the earliest followers of Jesus, with Paul being the most prominent among them.[10]

In effect, the ethical debates in which the Pharisees and later rabbis engaged, later described as *halakah*, are roughly equivalent to what we might call theological or biblical ethics. Put another way, even as they disagreed with Jesus, the Pharisees were committed not to legalism but rather to following after God (discipleship!).[11] As many of us with a close sibling understand, it may well have been the extent of their shared commitments and perspectives that made the debates between Jesus and the Pharisees about areas of disagreement so heated.

All this is not to ignore significant differences. Jesus's tendency to claim divine interpretive authority without referring to his teachers disrupted governing norms. And certainly his claim that "something greater than the temple is here"—whether speaking of himself or the kingdom of heaven, so prominent in Matthew—would have been shocking. Furthermore, immediately preceding the discussion about the Sabbath, Jesus invites his listeners to "Come to me, . . . and I will give you rest. Take my yoke . . . For my yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Matt. 11:28–30). While observing the Sabbath represents a means of imitating God and celebrating divine action both in creation (Exod. 20:11) and the Exodus (Deut.5:15), here Jesus essentially identifies *himself* with the Sabbath.[12] Little wonder that the Pharisees were perturbed.

Reflections on ethical discernment in our day

On further reflection, we discover that the Pharisees' question in the Sabbath controversy passage sounds quite reasonable. Since within the New Testament what we call the Old Testament was referred to as the "law" or "the law and the prophets," in the first century a rough equivalent to the question "Is it lawful?" would be "Is it *biblical*?" In other words, the question whether such actions were appropriate was not a bad one but rather one that was and remains essential.

As we continue to debate the ethical demands of discipleship, we do well to consider our own interactions in light of Jesus's interaction with the Pharisees. In our day we experience, for lack of better terms, both conservative and liberal impulses; some value Scripture highly and largely on its own, while others insist on its broader social and literary context; some insist on the true, singular reading of a passage or topic, while others focus on multiple possibilities. While *both* impulses are crucial, each can also become problematic. For instance, a "conservative" tendency to insist on the central significance of Scripture can lead to simply selecting and quoting specific biblical passages in isolation, assuming that they are self-evident or self-interpreting. Likewise, a "liberal" tendency to insist on setting can lead to discussions of historical context, social science, and human rights that end up subordinating Scripture or even leaving it behind in discussions of contemporary demands and questions.[13]

Whatever we make of the disagreement between Jesus and his interlocutors about the *answer* to the Pharisees' question, paying greater attention to the debate itself challenges both liberal and conservative perspectives. Where we might be tempted to leave behind the question "Is it *biblical?*," *both* Jesus and the Pharisees took this question very seriously. And where we might assume that the Bible has spoken and there is little more to be said, *both* Jesus and the Pharisees recognized the need for ongoing interpretation, and entered into the fray with gusto.

This passage suggests that we have much to learn as we wrestle with ethical conundrums in our day. While we often antagonize each other or assume that "the Bible" or "the Gospel" is on one side or another (usually my/our side), individuals and communities with a more conservative impulse and those with a more liberal one actually *need* each other, since both emphases contribute to contemporary discernment and avoid having either become a knee-jerk tendency.[14]

In the end, when we treat biblical discernment as a matter of identifying self-evident truths, whether in first-century Palestine or twenty-first-century North America, we do ourselves a great disservice. Scriptural interpretation was and continues to be a contested space. However, even as we disagree on the answer to a particular question of faithful living, we should also be willing to admit that often the other "side" is asking a key question or holds a significant insight. The Pharisees were *right* to ask Jesus, "Is this biblical?," a question that remains key for faithful ethical discernment in our day too. But to our discomfort and amazement, in returning once again to our well-worn Scriptures (engaging Scripture is vital!), faithful interpretation may well be found in an unexpected reading of the received tradition (reinterpretation is required!).

Conclusion

At first glance the Sabbath controversies in Matthew seem clear-cut: the Pharisees legalistically and foolishly hold to the "letter of the law," where Jesus transcends it in the interests of justice and mercy. Neither could be further from the case. The Pharisees challenge Jesus with a key question: Is this *lawful* (*biblical*)? Does this accord with the will of God, known to us through Scripture (Torah)? Thoroughly grounded in Scripture and without rejecting the significance of the Sabbath, Jesus provides an interpretive response that intriguingly reorients the question being asked. Being disciples of this Messiah/Christ requires attention to both impulses, hyperattentiveness and dedication to Scripture along with the willingness to reinterpret the tradition. Neither is easy—but then again, who says following Jesus should be?

Even as we disagree on the answer to a particular question of faithful living, we should be willing to admit that often the other "side" is asking a key question or holds a significant insight. The Pharisees were *right* to ask Jesus, "Is this biblical?"

Notes

[1] Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the NRSV.

[2] The Hebrew term for commandment does not appear here.

[3] Waldemar Janzen, *Exodus*, Believers Church Bible Commentary (Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 2000), 258–61.

[4] Janzen, *Exodus*, 250.

[5] This exclusion is particularly striking in light of the inclusion of Ruth, who is repeatedly identified as "the Moabite" (Ruth 2:2, 21; 4:5). While focusing on the *decision* of what to do about marriage to foreigners would suggest that Ezra/Nehemiah and Ruth contradict each other, both documents are fundamentally concerned with how to best follow Torah (law). In other words, *both* cases reflect contextual discernment of the ethical demands of Torah obedience, and perhaps most importantly, *both* sides of the debate, including their divergent conclusions, are included in sacred Scripture.

[6] Intriguingly, the Greek term "eunuch" (*eunoxos*) appears just six times in the New Testament, five in the short passage in Acts 8:26–40, and just twice in Isaiah—precisely in Isaiah 56:3–4.

[7] The account of the rape of Dinah and its aftermath in Genesis 34 provides a good example where "an eye for an eye" would have vastly limited bloodshed.

[8] The principle of *qal wehomer* (from weak to strong) is a well-recognized rabbinic interpretive technique. See mention of this element in a broader survey of "Jewish Hermeneutics in the First Century," by Richard N. Longenecker, in *Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 20.

[9] Pauline correspondence, which consistently refers to "saints" or "holy ones," reflects this ongoing concern (Rom. 1:7; 1 Cor. 1:2; 2 Cor. 1:1; etc.).

[10] It is also worth recognizing that, particularly following the sack of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple in 70 CE, the Pharisees competed with the Jesus movement for adherents. See Jacob Neusner, "The Pharisees: Jesus' Competition," in *Judaism in the Beginning of Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 45–61.

[11] Although contemporary Judaism traces its roots to the Pharisaic tradition, this group has long been disparaged in Christian tradition and culture. The term *pharisaical* in the online Merriam Webster's dictionary is "defined" as "marked by hypocritical censorious self-righteousness" (http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/pharisaical), and even prominent scholarly resources can reflect such stereotyped bias: "The term [*exestin*, 'lawful'] is used in relation to the Jewish Law and the exposition of the Pharisees, and the use of this legal formula is *typical of Jewish legalism*" (Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 2 [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964–], 561; my italics).

[12] Bruce Chilton and Jacob Neusner, *Judaism in the New Testament: Practices and Beliefs* (London: Routledge, 1995), 135–44.

[13] For the crucial importance of ongoing biblical engagement within theologically diverse interpreting communities, see W. Derek Suderman, "Wrestling with Our Identity," *Canadian Mennonite* 17, no. 9 (April 29, 2013), 4–7; and W. Derek Suderman, "Wrestling with Violent Depictions of God: A Response to Eric Seibert's *Disturbing Divine Behavior*," *Direction* 40, no. 2 (Fall 2011): 156–61. Both articles are available in full online.

[14] For discussion of the need for an interpreting community in light of specific, complex issues (discerning lament and divine violence in the Bible respectively), see W. Derek Suderman, "The Cost of Losing Lament for the Community of Faith: On Brueggemann, Ecclesiology, and the Social Audience of Prayer," *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 6, no. 2 (Fall 2012): 212–17; and W. Derek Suderman, "Assyria the Ax, God the Lumberjack: Jeremiah 29, the Logic of the Prophets, and the Quest for a Non-Violent God," *Conrad Grebel Review* 32, no. 1 (Winter 2014): 61–66.

About the author

W. Derek Suderman, associate professor of religious studies and theological studies (Old Testament) at Conrad Grebel University College and the University of Waterloo (Ontario), is the author of "Psalms" in the *Fortress Commentary on the Old Testament and Apocrypha* (Fortress, 2014). He represents Mennonite Church Canada on the Believers Church Bible Commentary editorial council and is a member of St. Jacob's Mennonite Church. Derek is married to educator and writer Rebecca Seiling; they have two daughters, Zoe and Eden.

Book review

Ron Guengerich

Sabbath as Resistance: Saying No to the Culture of Now, by Walter Brueggemann. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014.

Walter Brueggemann, with his usual lucidity, makes an invaluable contribution to explorations of Sabbath by examining a variety of Scriptures within the Hebrew Bible that discuss the importance and practice of Sabbath. He locates Sabbath at the core of biblical faith and biblical theology. First he offers a treatment of Sabbath as a critique both of the ancient cultures with which Israel interacted and of the dominant culture in our contemporary world.

Brueggemann's book integrates Sabbath as a core value and central practice into the vary fabric of biblical faith and the covenant community.

The title—*Sabbath as Resistance: Saying No to the Culture of Now*—continues the *leitmotif* that Brueggemann has persistently and vigorously developed throughout his writing: the faith of Israel—continued by Jesus—is a subversive and radical departure from the imperial system of the dominant culture, whether that be Egypt or Babylon or Rome or the United States. For Brueggemann, Sabbath is one crucial and central factor in living out this radical, subversive, energizing perspective. Sabbath is the day every week when we are called to renew our imagination and strengthen our relationships in a leisurely way that brings blessing to us and to all who join us in this formative day. For Brueggemann, Sabbath is not seen as a law, a proscription to be obeyed, but rather as an identity-forming blessing and a memory-enhancing opportunity.

This book is eye opening as it integrates Sabbath as a core value and central practice into the very fabric of biblical faith and the covenant community. Siang-Yang Tan, in *Rest: Experiencing*

God's Peace in a Restless World, observes that rest has many facets: physical, emotional, spiritual, and relational.[1] Sabbath touches on all these aspects, but Brueggemann focuses his reflections especially on the relational aspects of Sabbath, a day of stopping, as a day of rest.

Brueggemann's thesis is that the Sabbath commandment—the fourth of the Ten Words—is the pivotal point of this covenant document. It is what connects the First Word (the remembrance and awareness of what God has done) with the Last Word (a new covenantal society in which the greed, anxiety, and covetousness of the empire are replaced by neighborly concerns). Not only is Sabbath the pivotal point within the Ten Words, but it remains a focus within the ongoing discussions of the Torah and the Prophets.

The first and last chapters form the envelope for this book. Brueggemann examines Sabbath in relation to the first and the last words of the Ten Words. The First Word focuses on the relationship and expectation of singular allegiance that Yahweh expects of his people: "You shall have no other God's before me." This is an allegiance based on Yahweh's deliverance of the slaves in Egypt from Pharaoh's restless, oppressive imperial system. Yahweh's deliverance is pure grace, and Sabbath itself is a day of grace. The Tenth Word summarizes the alternative perspective of the covenant in which covetousness is replaced by neighborly concern and respect.

Brueggemann sees Sabbath as a benefit and blessing that sets the covenantal community of Israel apart from the imperial systems that compete for Israel's allegiance and attention.

Brueggemann sees Sabbath as a benefit and blessing that sets the covenantal community of Israel apart from the imperial systems that compete for Israel's allegiance and attention. The Sabbath "command" is seen as a descriptive core of Israel's commitments rather than a prescriptive restriction that hampers Israel's freedom. Sabbath is a day of delight and freedom that is to be experienced by humans and livestock, by insiders and sojourners. As is typical for Brueggemann, here too he explores the interface between the biblical text and the contemporary world.

The middle three chapters observe concerns for the relational aspects of the covenant community as Sabbath reappears in the prophetic warnings and critiques of the alternative community's forgetfulness of Sabbath (and its basis) and of this community's proclivity to become like the other nations, like the empire from which Israel had been delivered. These three chapters focus on additional commentary about the Sabbath in the Torah (especially in the restatement of the Ten Words in Deuteronomy 5:12–14) and in the Prophets (Isa. 56:3–8 and Amos 8:4–8). Brueggemann's comments integrate these passages with other biblical passages that articulate the ease with which Israel is enticed into practices and perspectives of the surrounding imperial cultures.

This short, synthesizing volume gives us a delightful examination of diverse texts concerning Sabbath and a cutting critique of the ways that we today, by not "remembering the Sabbath," are adopting a life of dis-ease, forgetfulness, and anxiety. This volume deserves to be read and reread, examined and discussed, and brought to communities of discernment for strategizing about how we can reappropriate Sabbath as part of the fabric of our weekly lives.

Note

[1] Siang-Yang Tan, *Rest: Experiencing God's Peace in a Restless World* (Vancouver: Regent College Pub., 2000), 27–33.

About the reviewer

Ron Guengerich is beginning an extended Sabbath/sabbatical (also known as retirement), in which he is preparing to recycle himself into new uses of his time and energy. He has spent the last thirty years as a seminary and college teacher of Old Testament, and as a pastor in Kansas, Ohio, and most recently in Goshen, Indiana, where he and his wife Ruth live.

Books on Sabbath
An annotated bibliography

Ron Guengerich

Recent years have seen a resurgence of attention to Sabbath—its practice, it value, its benefits, its purpose, and its significance for theology and human existence. This issue of *Vision* is one more place of reflection on this special day. Over the past seventy years writers have contributed many new perspectives on Sabbath, with the primary shift being toward seeing Sabbath as a gift and blessing rather than a restriction and limitation.

A selective roster of the most significant voices reflecting on Sabbath, in both poetry and prose, is impressive, fascinating, and diverse. They are listed below in the order of their first appearance in print. Each of these voices contributes an urgent and appreciative perspective on Sabbath. Each of them proposes new understandings, renewed practices, and revised appreciation for "remembering" the Sabbath, a day of rest.

Over the past seventy years writers have contributed many new perspectives on Sabbath, with the primary shift being toward seeing Sabbath as a gift and blessing rather than a restriction.

The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man, by Abraham Joshua Heschel (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Young, 1951). Heschel initiates attention to Sabbath among modern writers, with his classic treatment of the Jewish attitudes and practices of Sabbath. Walter Brueggemann is correct in calling this a magisterial book that articulates the Jewish perception of and appreciation for the Sabbath. Heschel (1907–72) did more than anyone else to enhance the relevance of Sabbath in modern times. This is required reading for gaining deeper insight into Sabbath.

Sabbath Time: Understanding Practice for Contemporary Christians, by Tilden Edwards (New York: Seabury Press, 1982). Edwards contributes an additional examination that presents both

Christian and Jewish practices and attitudes. This book introduces the idea and practice of Sabbath as receptive time, a time when we stop the active time of the other six days to receive the gift of the day.

Sabbaths, by Wendell Berry (San Francisco: North Points Press, 1987). Wendell Berry presents a wonderful short collection of poems written over seven years, giving us his gentle ruminations on the blessings and joys of Sabbath solitude and quiet. This thin volume is the witness of a Sabbath practitioner.

Keeping Sabbath Wholly: Ceasing, Resting, Embracing, Feasting, by Marva Dawn (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989). This practical and theological journal examines Marva Dawn's own interaction with Sabbath, noting the various actions that are part of Sabbath observance. A paean of praise for and delight in the practice and discovery of Sabbath, this collection of personal observations, scriptural interpretation, and lore about the Sabbath becomes a prism for examining Scripture from many different angles.

Sabbath: Finding Rest, Renewal, and Delight in Our Busy Lives, by Wayne Muller (New York: Bantam Books, 2000). Wayne Muller, a Christian pastor and therapist, provides a rich anthology of reflections on Sabbath and rest that expands the Sabbath horizon to add the wisdom of other traditions concerning observance and remembrance of Sabbath. This book explores the multitude of simple disciplines that enrich a day when nothing productive is done, a day when we begin to enjoy, relish, and observe blessings that we miss amid our frenetic daily activities.

Sabbath and Jubilee, by Richard H. Lowery (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2000). Richard Lowery locates the theme and activity of Sabbath observance as central to an understanding of biblical faith. He lays out the rich social, economic, political, and cultural context of traditions concerning Sabbath (and Jubilee) and spells out implications for our day. This book ties Sabbath to a multitude of texts from the Hebrew Bible.

Rest: Experiencing God's Peace in a Restless World, by Siang-Yang Tan (Vancouver: Regent College Pub., 2000). Though not primarily about Sabbath, this book describes the subversive and alternative practices that are necessary to enter the times of rest that are lacking in our contemporary world.

Living the Sabbath: Discovering the Rhythms of Rest and Delight, by Norman Wirzba (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2006). Norman Wirzba provides another set of practical suggestions about how to observe Sabbath, and he also discusses why Sabbath is needed and what is lost when we forget the Sabbath. This book works in much the same way as Brueggemann's: giving a critique of the bankruptcy and malaise of our current life-without-Sabbath while also providing the rationale for and description of the practices that make Sabbath a healing, wonder-filled day.

The Sabbath World: Glimpses of a Different Order of Time, by Judith Shulevitz (New York: Random House, 2010). Judith Shulevitz provides erudite reflection on her deep desire to enter the Sabbath. This delightful book gives Shulevitz's personal interaction and struggle with Sabbath, noting how Sabbath observance creates a whole different perspective on time as it is experienced during the other six days of the week.

About the reviewer

Ron Guengerich is beginning an extended Sabbath/sabbatical (also known as retirement), in which he is preparing to recycle himself into new uses of his time and energy. He has spent the last thirty years as a seminary and college teacher of Old Testament, and as a pastor in Kansas, Ohio, and most recently in Goshen, Indiana, where he and his wife Ruth live.