

Remember the Sabbath

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Psalm 92
Mark 2:23-28
Exodus 20:8-11
Exodus 31:12-17

I don't know how it feels to you, but this sabbatical thing that I am about to embark on feels pretty momentous for me. I haven't been away from home for more than 10 days since 1990 when I went to Africa for five weeks. Tomorrow we leave for 3½ weeks on the road. After the MCUSA convention in Columbus we go to Minnesota, Nebraska, Illinois and Michigan to visit family and friends.

Being away from home means being away from this congregation. I can still remember that I missed worshipping here when I was traveling in Kenya and Zambia. Call me a homebody, but it is hard for me to leave this worshipping and serving community for any length of time. This is probably one reason it is time for me to take a sabbatical.

In academia you get time off every seven years. And you are expected to work during that time, doing research or writing. Theoretically, you don't teach, you learn. I understand that for pastors, this is different though I do hope learning is part of the next 12 weeks. Pastor friends ask about my sabbatical: What I will study? How I will serve? How I will renew? I intend to concentrate on renewal with hopes that this will help me serve and study better upon my return.

The term sabbatical is of course related to Sabbath. We know this — the Sabbath is the day of rest, the day to stop working. In the Hebrew Bible everyone — men, women and children, servants and slaves, visitors and immigrants, even

livestock — is supposed to get a day off. As I said to the children, Sabbath in the Jewish and Christian tradition is based on the idea that God created the world in six days and on the seventh day rested. In Exodus it goes a step further.

Sabbath becomes one of the important covenants that God makes with God's people. Noah received the rainbow as a covenant signifying that the Earth would not again be destroyed through a flood. Abraham received circumcision as a covenant representing his role as the patriarch and father of the nation. While the people of Israel used circumcision as a weapon sometimes (as when the sons of Jacob tricked the men of Shechem into being circumcised, and while they were in pain attacked them), it was intended as a tangible sign that these were God's people.

Moses receives the Sabbath as a covenant between God and the people at Mount Sinai (Exodus 20). Of course this was just the fourth of Ten Commandments that Moses received. Later in Exodus, Yahweh speaks to Moses telling him specifically how to build the tabernacle and all of its' contents. Six times "Yahweh says to Moses," giving instructions about construction, what to offer as a sacrifice, the role of Aaron and the priestly line and other particulars. The seventh time that "Yahweh says to Moses" it is the instruction about the Sabbath. As important as the tabernacle was as a dwelling place for God, even as they built it they were to stop work every week and observe the Sabbath.

If God required people to take a Sabbath while building the tabernacle how can we do any different when building up the reign of God? We who prize hard work, and excel at it, forget that rest is part of the created cycle of life. How

do we make Sabbath part of our lives so that we renew and refresh our spirits, allowing our minds to think new and creative thoughts, allowing our bodies to find their own natural rhythms of eating and sleeping, loving and learning. It is not easy in this city, in this country, in this economy to observe Sabbath

In the Bible, it is not only the people and livestock that are to take a Sabbath, every seven years the land is to receive a Sabbath, lying fallow for a year. If it is good for people, it is good for the soil to rest and recover. I suppose the worms keep working as the nutrients are restored to the soil.

I wonder if letting the land sit idle, without planting and harvesting for a year, seemed irresponsible to onlookers. While it may have seemed strange it did provide new opportunities for the community to work together and plan ahead. Certainly the community had to depend on each other in different ways for sustenance and survival.

Sabbath was serious. We heard the Exodus 20 version of injunction for the Sabbath this morning. But in Exodus 31, the mandate for the Sabbath is more severe.

Everyone who profanes it (the Sabbath) shall be put to death; whoever does any work on it shall be cut off from among the people. ¹⁵For six days shall work be done, but the seventh day is a sabbath of solemn rest, holy to God; whoever does any work on the sabbath day shall be put to death.

This is harsh language. A clue here is that the person who breaks the Sabbath is to be cut off. It is as good as death, to be cut off when one is living in the tenuous circumstances of the desert. But why such a ruthless penalty? While

rest and worship were important, the Sabbath helped to define the Israelites as a people. They were that group that took a day off to worship their God. In addition, it was essential that the children of Israel acknowledge their humanness, recognize that they were not God. The Sabbath was a way to routinely admit their dependence on their creator. Remembering the Sabbath was a way to keep them in right relationship with each other and with God.

But to be forced to take a break sounds ridiculous. Who wouldn't want an excuse to take a day off from working in the hot sun? Why do they have to have the threat of death hanging over them in order to keep the Sabbath? What is wrong with them?

Consider our own propensity for work, to find our value in what we do rather than who we are — in relation to each other or to God. Sometimes we can hardly find room to be with the people we love. We eat too much, sleep too little, drink too much and avoid slowing down or stopping in many ways. People do die from heart attacks, strokes, disease because they work too much and don't know how to stop. Sabbath is a gift, a mandate, to breathe for a day and reorder our lives.

The Sabbath was central in the life of the Jewish people, (though the prophet Nehemiah had to remind them to keep the Sabbath, even going so far as to lock the city gates so no business could be done that day). When Jesus came along, a Jewish teacher, and turned the idea of Sabbath on its head, it was quite upsetting to the keepers of the law. Who was he to take this commandment into his own hands? Jesus, hounded as he was by people, healed on the Sabbath.

Though truth be told sometimes he healed on the Sabbath — in the synagogue — even when people didn't ask for healing (for ex. Mark 3, Luke 13).

Jesus' audacious breaking of the fourth commandment threatened the religious authorities. He rewrote the rules, reinterpreted the law and the prophets. He wasn't trying to be rid of them, just bringing a new interpretation and understanding to the law and prophets. He understood the commandments to be life-giving, not life depriving.

Thus we read that Jesus allowed the disciples to pick grain on the Sabbath. They were not harvesting to sell; they were picking corn for their own use, to eat. And most religious leaders would have agreed that there was room for this under the law. Jesus likens his disciples' actions to the time that David, fleeing the wrath of Saul, misled the local priest so that he could get something to eat. The only thing available was the consecrated bread. It would be akin to eating the communion bread for lunch because there is nothing else (I Samuel 21). Jesus doesn't give a lot of explanation, just sights this common bit of religious history as justification for the disciples' transgression.

Jesus says that the Sabbath is made for people, not people for the Sabbath. This is not quite like saying rules are made to be broken. The rules are made to serve people. People are not created to follow rules, rules are created to make our life together better. Thus the Sabbath is not to be a hindrance but a support to our lives together.

But I wonder if Sabbath always made life better or easier. In the Bible it is clear that everyone gets the day off — the slaves, the pack mules and oxen —

everyone. But I wonder if women ever really got time off. Were they able to sit and not cook or care for children? Or was it as vacations used to feel to me when my children were younger. It wasn't really a time of rest. It was more like moving house to a different, unfamiliar, less child friendly location. Was Sabbath really rest for the women or the children?

As for sabbatical, I wonder at the unfairness of it all. I have a job I love with wonderful people and you ask me to take three months away to revitalize myself. But what about all the people with jobs they hate, working with people that are mean and spiteful? They never get a break. And what about the people that don't even have jobs?

Another thing — I can't help noticing that my own lying fallow means more work for many of you. A number of you will preach and the pastorate will take calls for pastoral care. Annabelle and Adam will hold even more administrative details than usual. But life will go on. And I hope that this time will be one of new growth for all of us: for Adam to exercise his gifts for ministry in new ways; for you as a congregation to get to know Adam in new ways as pastor. I hope this provides room for some of you, who have not had opportunity, to stretch and channel your talents.

I have to preach this sermon to myself, to rationalize that it is okay to take time off. There is Biblical and theological justification for time away. I certainly support other people when they have sabbaticals, I believe in the concept. It's just that I am not sure how this will all work out for me. What will having 12 weeks away do for my brain, my heart, my mind, my body, my soul?

I am entering these months trusting that God (and the worms) will be at work, that the soil of my head and heart will be loosened so that new ideas and new energy, new empathy and understanding will emerge so I can return refreshed and rejuvenated.

Thank you for this opportunity, for this gift of sabbatical. My prayer is that all of you will have some time to rest and refresh yourselves this summer. May there be holy, Sabbath time for you to breathe in gratefulness and an awareness of God's presence — and exhale worry. May we all experience a glimpse of the reign of God as we relax into God's time, remembering the Sabbath.