

19.3.10

“Sabbath as Resistance”

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Witness of Scripture: Exodus 20:8-11

“Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. For six days you shall labour and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.”

Witness of the Spirit:

“Six days a week we wrestle with the world, wringing profit from the earth; on the Sabbath we especially care for the seed of eternity planted in the soul. The world has our hands, but our soul belongs to Someone Else.” - Rabbi Abraham Heschel

Welcome to the Season of Lent! We began this past week - on Ash Wednesday - with us remembering our mortality - remembering that we are dust and to dust we shall return. Ominous - but necessary reminder, with an exhortation to make the most of each day, for each is a gift. Now, we continue in the 40 Day season of Lent - (minus Sundays). The 40 days are meant to coincide with the 40 Days Jesus spent in the wilderness, before beginning his earthly ministry. It was a time of trial, and temptation, but also a time of clarification and renewal of purpose. Traditionally, this is a season for practicing repentance - A time when we get really honest about all the ways we're not quite hitting the mark in our lives.

More than any other in the Church year, this is the Season for Practicing the Spiritual Disciplines. Whether you prefer to “*Give up something for Lent*” - i. e. spirits, sweets, or single-use plastic...OR whether you prefer to “*Take up something for Lent*”... i.e. meditation, prayer, spiritual reading, or some form of charity, Lent is a time to be intentional about how we live.

But, let's be honest, that word, “Discipline” isn't one of our favorites. It has some negative connotations, right? We don't usually sign up willingly for *discipline*. *We don't generally seek to add restrictions to our life*. Fasting, other forms of self-denial, common to this season - are counter-cultural. Lent is counter-cultural.

And yet, such disciplines are supposed to help us take the next steps on our journey of spiritual growth. And, most of us desire spiritual growth, so why don't we embrace Lent with more enthusiasm? Does Lent have to feel like six weeks of wearing a hair-shirt and spiritual self-flagellation?

As I contemplated themes for this year's celebration of Lent, I wondered - is there a way to shift, from our typical conception of Lent to something different - from a fasting from X, Y, or Z mentality, to something more like Norah Jones singing - "Come away with me." An invitation to peace, joy, and greater wholeness?

And I remembered a book Jim Burnett had given me, and thought... *What about Sabbath? What about Keeping Sabbath as our Lenten discipline this year?* I was talking with my wife, Hannah, about my theme, and she said - "OK, but you should tell them they should think of Sabbath less like 'mandatory bed-rest,' and more like a free day at the spa! Or else no one will be interested!"

So, if it helps you, let's all think about Sabbath more like a day at the spa, or up on the mountain, or out on the golf-course... Think of Sabbath-keeping in the very best sense - the life-giving, liberating sense that it was intended, not as you've always experienced it.

What do I mean by liberating? I'll give you an example - By accident, I left my cell phone at home a few weeks ago. Normally, I feel like I'm missing an appendage without my phone, but occasionally, it happens, and it feels like a *happy accident* - an unintended "liberation" from my tether.

One of you shared a picture on social media this week of an old rotary phone with a quote that went something like - "When phones were attached to wires, people were free." *That's how Sabbath is supposed to feel!*

The problem is, over time, we've lost touch with the concept of Sabbath, and have forgotten how it came to be, if we ever knew in the first place. I want us to take a moment and remember - What did "Sabbath" look like for you, growing up? Think back to Sundays in your childhood - how do you remember them? Were they happy? Restful? Or were they restrictive? Life-sucking? Or Life-giving?

I confess, I'm sometimes a little nostalgic for Sunday's past. I remember how nice it was as a youth pastor - years ago, when no one scheduled athletics or other school events on Sundays. Sundays were pretty much for church, and family, then maybe more church... and not much else. I remember I had a friend, Jordan, from church, whose family was even *more*

religious than mine. And he wasn't allowed to go over to play at a friend's house on Sunday afternoons because it was "Sabbath" and their family always spent it together, at home - for the entire day. I had a hard time understanding that.

I remember another occasion of a Sunday spoiled - when Hannah and I going out for our anniversary one year, when it happened to fall on Sunday, and we were planning to buy a bottle of champagne to celebrate and we drove all the way in the snow to this retreat in the country, and then stopped at a store to get some provisions, but found all the alcohol cases were locked - because it was Sunday - and there were "blue laws" which prevented the sale of alcohol on Sundays in that town.

I'm guessing that many of us have experienced sabbath-keeping as either annoyingly restrictive, or almost completely culturally irrelevant. But here's my hypothesis - As our 24/7 culture takes hold of our lives, we find ourselves hungering more and more for what we used to call "Sabbath."

I recently saw an advertisement by a faith-leader and speaker, Glennon Doyle, whom I respect and enjoy reading, and it was for an event titled, "Self-Care as a Tool for Empowerment and Social Change." And you know what I thought? - that's Sabbath! - That's Sabbath *rebranded* for today.

At least, that's closer to what it was originally intended to be... And I suspect, because of all the baggage we've accumulated on this idea over the years, many of us need a new lens through which to appreciate Sabbath. Which is why I've chosen this book (show book) -

Sabbath as Resistance: Saying "No" in the Culture of "Now" by Rev. Dr. Walter Brueggemann - for study during this Lenten season. I don't usually preach a sermon-series, preferring to follow the lectionary most of the year... but over the next Six Weeks of Lent, I invite us to meditate on this theme of Sabbath. It has six chapters.

- Sabbath and the First Commandment
- Resistance to Anxiety
- Resistance to Coercion
- Resistance to Exclusivism
- Resistance to Multi-Tasking
- Sabbath and the Tenth Commandment

If you want a deeper dive, the Tuesday Afternoon book group is reading it, or you can pick up your own copy, and follow along in the study guide in the back. It's not a long book, but it is rich. And there are other books on the topic of Sabbath which I would recommend:

- *Keeping the Sabbath Wholly* - by Marva Dawn
- *Sabbath* - by Rabbi Abraham Heschel

What I like about Brueggeman's book is the way that he has framed the topic of Sabbath - as **Resistance**. That word has a lot of strong connotations - especially in our current moment in history.

I have to say, it sorta feels like an invitation to sign-up and fight alongside Luke and Leia, Han and Chewie, R2 and C3PO... And like Star Wars - this Resistance goes beyond resistance to any one individual, or even a few - and extends as resistance to a Force, or forces, of oppression that take form in every generation. I don't want to get ahead of myself, but what I appreciate about his text is how Brueggemann has attached such epic importance to sabbath-keeping, because, I'll be honest, that's not how I've always felt about Sabbath growing up, or how Brueggemann experienced it..

He begins in the preface by examining the Christian practice of Sunday Sabbath-Keeping in the North American context, and like my early experiences of Sundays, Brueggemann says his was "enmeshed in legalism and moralism and blue laws and life-denying practices that contradict the freedom-bestowing intentions of Sabbath" (20). Then he argues, if we are to understand it rightly, we must understand first that Sabbath-keeping is a distinctly Jewish art form. (p. 20) Brueggemann writes: "As in so many things concerning Christian faith and practice, we have to be re-educated by Judaism - that has been able to sustain its commitment to Sabbath as a positive practice" (x).

Moreover - Brueggeman writes that the Sabbath is rooted in the narrative of the Exodus and the God who is not known (who is unknown) apart from that narrative. Consider - (Under bondage in Egypt) Israel was subsumed in an endless system of insatiable productivity that knew no rest: Pharaoh, and the gods of Egypt, and the culture of wealth-building, is a hard-nosed manager - who kept them always working. Always forcing them to do more with less.

- In Moses encounter with YHWH at the Burning Bush, and on Mt. Sinai, YHWH collides with the gods of Egypt by interceding as a "Sabbath-keeping God, a Sabbath-giving God, and Sabbath-commanding God" (10).

And when the Ten Words - or Ten Commandments as we know them, are introduced, they are introduced as correctives to ways the ways of living under the rule of the Pharaoh. And see how inclusive the sabbath is intended to be. It is not just intended for the wealthy and powerful - but for all all ages, all genders, for all classes, for the resident alien (read “undocumented immigrant”) ...even for livestock! Even for Creatures, and Creation, there is supposed to be “Sabbath.” By gifting ancient Israel with the fourth commandment, the invitation to Sabbath - YHWH breaks the systemic cycle of “coveting acquisitiveness.” Sabbath-keeping was then, and still is *subversive* - it is a resistance towards the endless drive for more.

Lately, I’ve been talking with a few folks about their vocations: Folks looking for a job. Folks ready to quit a job. Folks transitioning from one job to another. Folks working to make things more fair. We live in a culture not unlike Pharaoh’s Egypt. We may not have slavery (per se), but the same forces of exploitation persist today in new forms. Brueggemann writes,

“In the ancient context, they must depart from the Egyptian system (of endless production), in order to dance and sing freedom... The departure from that same system in our time is not geographical. It is rather, emotional, liturgical, and economic. It is not an idea but a practical act. Thus the Sabbath of the fourth commandment is an act of trust in the subversive, exodus-causing God of the first commandment, and act of submission to the restful God of commandments one, two and three. Sabbath is a practical divestment so that neighborly engagement, rather than production and consumption defines our lives. There’s a good reason Sabbath has been a defining discipline for theologically serious Jews, and Enlightenment-minded Christians. ... We are, liberals and conservatives, much inured with Pharaoh’s system.... To cease, even for a time, the anxious striving for more bricks is to find ourselves with a “light burden” and an easy yoke. It is now as then, enough to permit dancing and singing into alternative life.”¹

The invitation for this week, this season, is to consider - how we have kept Sabbath? How can this practice instruct us for our lives today? How might we reclaim it, so that it is once again, the subversive, prophetic, and live-giving practice it was once intended to be. Let us continue to ask the questions over the coming weeks. And may the Spirit lead us in all truth. Amen.

¹ Walter Brueggeman, p. 18-19, *Sabbath as Resistance*