

“Take a Break”

The meaning of Sabbath

Genesis 1:31-2:3, Exodus 20:8-11

(Video: “It’s Time to Rest” – RNM)

[55] Welcome

Prayer

[56] I suspect many of you, like me, know what it is like to chase the sun as you put in long hours at work. Probably the hardest project I ever finished was my master’s thesis. There were times I worked seven days straight, staying up long hours, trying to force the words onto the page. I remember being envious of other students who made their work look easy. I read a story of a student who religiously took a full day off every week from her doctoral thesis. She actually finished earlier than her classmates. At the time, it seemed impossible to me.

[57] Last week I spent five days in the middle of the forest at Camp Michigamme, our local United Methodist summer camp. I was not counseling. There were only two other mammals there: my friend, Pastor John, from Menominee, and a groundhog I nicknamed Chuckie. The purpose of that week was simple: I was taking time away so I could do some reading, reflecting, and planning. It was a spiritual retreat, a tradition I started last year, something which is strongly recommended for all pastors, and yet something not all of us do.

I have to admit, as much as I love my job, it is good to take a step back, to take a break from the daily grind, and connect with God. That’s why I claim Friday as my day off. When I first become a youth minister, my pastor told me I had to take one weekday off, especially since I would be working Sundays. I initially chose Wednesdays, which was also my dad’s day off, so I could reconnect with my family. Ever since, I have always laid aside one weekday to connect with my family and rest from my work.

Despite my commitment to rest, there are times when I feel totally exhausted from the pressures of work. Ironically, the more pressure I feel, the harder it is to sleep.

[58] A lot of us feel this way. Exhausted. Worn out. Stressed. Worried. Anxious. As a society, we just are not very good at telling each other to rest.

According to the National Sleep Foundation, humans need a minimum of 7 hours of sleep to function. For some, as much as 9 hours. When we don't get it, our thinking becomes cloudy, our nerves are frayed, our tempers are short, and frankly, people don't like to be around us. Corporations actually pay big money to send their burned-out execs to resorts in remote “dead zones” where no one can email, call or text them.

[59] Many years ago, author Robert Fulghum made the following observation in his book, All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten. He wrote, “Think what a better world it would be if all - the whole world - had cookies and milk about three o'clock every afternoon and then lay down with our blankies for a nap.”

Why does that resonate with us?

[60] The reason is simple. It is how God created us. God did not design us to constantly be working; we are designed to take a regular break.

In the opening chapters of the Bible, we see God creates the whole world in six days. At the end of the sixth day, God surveys the whole scene and says, “It's very good.” Then on the seventh day, God eats a plate of warm cookies, drinks a glass of milk, and takes a nap. [61] OK, not literally, but the Bible says, “God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done.” (Gen 2:3, NIV)

God wasn't done working in the world or guiding humanity. But God chose to rest on the seventh day when he could have still been creating. Why? To establish a rhythm for us. One day each week, we are not to exercise dominion over creation. Instead, we are to rest.

This idea of resting, called Sabbath, did not become a regular practice until Moses was leading the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt. After the parting of the sea, God called Moses up to Mt. Sinai in order to establish the covenant, what we commonly call the Ten Commandments. [62] Do you know rule #4? “Remember the Sabbath by keeping it holy.” (Ex 20:8) Slaves could not take Sabbath, but free people could. The Sabbath was to be set apart, and God expected his people to honor that command. Remembering the Sabbath keeps it holy. Forgetting the Sabbath dishonors God.

[63] Interestingly, the last commandment Moses receives before he can leave the mountain is an expansion on the Sabbath law. It was so important, people could be executed if they disobeyed. More importantly, God says, the Sabbath is “a sign between you and me,” a lasting sign of the covenant relationship between God and the people. (Ex 31:13) Keeping the Sabbath is a practical way to stay in love with God.

The Bible tells us, of course, Israel did not always keep the Sabbath. In fact, immediately after leaving Egypt, God told them to collect quail and manna daily to eat, but on Friday, they were allowed to collect twice as much. (Ex 16) Still, some people went out on Saturday and found nothing.

[64] That is an apt metaphor for our lives – when we burn the midnight oil and neglect the Sabbath, our work often is for naught. We get bogged down, tired, ineffective, and start worrying about temporary things. We should learn that Sabbath is best for us in the long term.

Some of you might be worrying that this Sabbath business is too legalistic. “What if I work on the weekends?” After all, this is a tourist town. Fortunately, Jesus also has a lot to say about the Sabbath. For example, he healed on the Sabbath – and got flack for it. (Matt 12, Luke 6,13,14, Mark 2,3) His disciples ate grain from the fields on the Sabbath – and Jesus defended them. Jesus did not like legalism. He was concerned with the principle of Sabbath, not the nit-picking. [65] In Mark 6:31, he tells his disciples, “Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest.” To the weary crowd harassed by the Romans and their own Jewish leaders, he offers, “Come, you who are weary and burdened, I will give you rest.” (Matt 11:28)

Jesus was the only person ever to follow God’s law perfectly. He is the self-proclaimed “Lord even of the Sabbath.” (Mark 2:28) So if even Jesus knew the importance of resting, who are we to say we don’t need to take a break?

[66] It is so easy to skip the Sabbath with our 24-hour access to electricity, lighting, internet, and convenience stores. We can work, shop and eat anytime we want. You can ignore sunrise and sunset, if you so desire.

[67] In her article “Losing Sabbath,” Sharon Ayala says, “True ‘rest’ is about truly giving up control - handing over one day a week so [we] remember even the

other six days aren't truly [ours].” Taking Sabbath is ultimately a measure of trust in God to control our lives. It is an active act of surrender.

[68] There is one thing I want to make absolutely clear. There is a huge difference between Sabbath and vacation. Vacations can really burn us out, am I right? So often, we complain, “I need a vacation!” But in reality, what we really need is rest. That is the power of Sabbath. Sabbath is a choice, not an escape. Escaping from work, procrastinating and simply being lazy, is not honoring the Sabbath. God calls us to work and to rest, not one or the other.

[69] So what should we do? First of all, if Sabbath isn't a rhythm of your life, start slowly. If you go cold turkey and pick a full day to unplug from everything and everyone, the habit is not likely to stick. The simplest way to start is to pick an activity that helps you connect to God. If you can pick a whole day, great, but don't panic if that's not currently possible.

[70] Orthodox Jews eschew electricity on the Sabbath. That's extreme, but you could have a day when you abstain from all video screen entertainment. Other ideas include spending intentional time with your family, strengthening your marriage (read between the lines, parents!), reading, walking, listening to music. Worshiping God is obviously a good practice on the Sabbath. I participated in Shabbat with my Jewish friends once, and I was blessed by their traditions. Reading the Bible is also one of the most obvious ways to honor the Sabbath.

Whatever you do, you should take a rest from the things that drain you, the things you are tempted to control, and instead let God recharge your spirit. Taking a regular Sabbath keeps you in balance and allows you to meet the challenges of life with new energy. I have been told, people who use their minds at work often look to hands-on activities for recharging. That's true for me. It's one of the reasons I enjoy windsurfing and XC skiing so much. The opposite is also true. If you work mostly with your hands, you might like reading or doing crossword puzzles on your Sabbath. Whatever fills you with joy and connects you to God, do it.

While the choice to honor and keep the Sabbath comes down to a lot of individual commitments, we don't want to lose sight of the fact that God gave this

command to his people. The job of the church to teach people how to follow God. [71] Too often, we unintentionally live like the road sign slogan some unfortunate pastor thought would be a good idea: "Don't let worry kill you...The church can help." Let's be clear: we will help you rest, not help kill you!

[72] The church – all of us – can work together to keep this Sabbath rest part of our identity. Imagine if our church, instead of burning people out, was known as a place where we could be renewed and restored. Practicing Sabbath helps us be healthier, individually and communally. We can teach people to say no to busyness and put a hedge of protection around their Sabbath. [73] We can teach people, in the words of Isaiah 40:31, that those who "wait in the Lord will renew their strength, they will mount up with wings like eagles, they will run and not be weary, they will walk and not faint..."

[74] We won't execute anyone for not taking Sabbath, thankfully. Unfortunately, the price of not resting is self-evident: heart disease and other physical ways our bodies alert us to the problem. So let's learn to prioritize our Sabbath rest. Let's hold each other accountable. Let's say no to burnout. AS Marcia McFee says, "Too much of a good thing is still too much!" Let us make more time for God, for our families, for our friends, so we can all find the rhythm of life God sings to us.

Take seriously this command to rest. Take Jesus at his word when he says you can lay your burdens down at his feet. Don't go back into slavery, thinking the world will fall apart if you take a break. It won't. Last time I checked, God runs the world, not us. If we follow the example God made for us, we will find rest and we will find God. It is a promise God makes to us.

Let's pray.

Memory Verse: "Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest."
Mark 6:31 (NIV)

Reflection Questions:

1. On a scale of 1-to-10, how stressed out are you at work or school?
2. What activities do you enjoy that allow you to relax?

3. When you think of the Sabbath, do you see it as a hassle or a blessing? Why?
4. Why does God give us the Sabbath by his own example?
5. What burdens have you released to Jesus? What burdens are you still carrying?
6. How can you reprioritize Sabbath rest in your life?

Sources:

“Losing Sabbath” by Sharon Ayala.

<https://www.pointloma.edu/resources/theology-christian-ministry/losing-sabbath>