

**“Sabbath”**  
**Genesis 2:1-3**  
**August 6, 2017**

As someone who works on Sundays, I have developed the good discipline of taking Mondays off. I usually don't go into the office or check email; I also try to avoid work-related reading. Instead, I run errands, do laundry, plan the week's meal, and check things off my to-do list. Which means that I come to the end of Monday tired. My house might be in order, but my soul feels just as frenzied as it did when I fell into bed late Sunday night.

Apparently, I am a classic workaholic. It has actually occurred to me that I should seek out a weekly “get things done” recovery group. I am pretty confident there are others of you who suffer from the same condition: too much to do, not enough rest—what one writer calls “hurry sickness.” But this week, as I studied and prayed over this week's passage in Genesis, a different sort of recovery program found me—a Biblical program, if you will: Sabbath rest. Now you might assume that because I'm a pastor I would have a pretty decent understanding of Sabbath. But the opposite is true. Even though I have been a pastor for nearly 18 years, I still think of strict observance of the Sabbath as going to church instead of showing up at the office; taking a nap instead of cutting the grass. Sabbath, for so many of us, is reduced to what we *don't* do on Sunday, kind of like ‘Christian blue laws’: no movies, no shopping, or any other worldly activities. If you and I are honest about it, we probably treat Sunday like any other day of the week, except that we attend Sunday morning worship, and we thank God that we don't have to go back again in the evening like the Baptists. Now don't get me wrong here. Worshiping God on Sunday mornings is a fine way to begin our Sabbath or to spend Sabbath time.

But from what I understand Sunday mornings can be everything but restful. Now, keep in mind, this is only hearsay, because for 15 years I have been up and out the door on Sunday mornings before anyone else in my household has even gotten out of bed. Apparently, Sunday mornings can be quite a struggle: someone always running late, missing shoes, syrup stuck on someone's face, and, God forbid, you walk into the sanctuary looking like the bedraggled troop that walked out the front door of the house just minutes before.

So let's face it: for many churchgoers, Sunday is busy! For vacation home owners it's a day to get out on the lake or the beach. For consumers, Sunday is a day to shop. For working people, it is a time to catch up and do all the errands and household chores that are missed during the week. For athletes and their families, it is a day for packing chairs, bags and water bottles and traveling far and wide to sporting events. As Robert and I picked this week's hymns, I was drawn to our opening hymn “O Day of Rest and Gladness” and it was stuck in my head all week. I made a point of reading the words every morning before beginning my work day. I thought, how peaceful and wonderful to have this refrain going through my mind and heart this week. Well, in a moment of full disclosure, I have to tell you it wasn't 24 hours later that I had rewritten the song: “O Day of Stress and Madness.” Clearly, we've lost just a little in translation. If Sunday doesn't feel like Sabbath rest, then what do we do? How do we incorporate this radical

commandment into our lives in the midst of a culture that knows nothing of setting aside a whole day to rest and delight in God?

The word Sabbath comes from the Hebrew word that means to “cease, to stop working.” It refers to a period of time each week set apart—holy, a cut above—the rest of the week. It’s about time and how we use it, or more accurately our nonuse of time...what we usually call wasting time. Making a rhythm, a pattern for work and for rest in our lives is, Biblically speaking, essential. And we know this because rhythms of rest were there from the beginning. When God created the world, he started with a clean slate and fresh vision. Each day incorporated a specific rhythm with rest as the endgame. On the first day he created light and darkness, and on the second day he made the heavens. The third day he created the earth and filled it with vegetation. On the fourth day of the week, God separated day from night, creating signs in the moon, stars, and sun for days, years, and seasons. On the fifth day he populated the sea with creatures and the heavens with birds. The sixth day he made beasts that creep and crawl and walk on the earth, and then he made humankind in his image to have dominion over all the animals. And we think *we* have had a full week! God stood back and looked at all he had done, rehearsing each previous day of work with the conclusion of deep satisfaction. It was VERY good.

And then, in Exodus, we find God giving a countercultural model for resting on the seventh day...a commandment, actually. Open up your Bibles to Exodus 20:8-11.

*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 to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is within them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.*

There it is. A commandment. Not a suggestion. Now, God didn’t need to rest. He’s God. He neither slumbers nor sleeps (Psalm 121:4). But He took a day anyway, and He blessed it and made it holy. He took a day to enjoy Himself and all that He had made. By stopping from creating, God created something else—the gift of Sabbath rest— and set an example, a pattern, and a rhythm for his people. 1-2-3-4-5-6-rest. 1-2-3-4-5-6-rest. This seventh day is no mere afterthought. It is not a reward for hard work. It is a primary means for God’s people to find wholeness, rest, and renewal in communion with God. In sum, the seventh day—Sabbath—is a fundamental piece of our human quest for God.

But such contentment that lends permission to rest seems elusive today. Work is, of course, nonnegotiable, whether you’re in an office or a grocery store, a classroom, or at a baby-changing table. But we’ve become a culture addicted to busyness. We are a “get ‘er done” lot, holding ourselves and others to extreme standards of productivity and work allegiance. One opinion writer for *The New Yorker* said “overwork has become a credential of prosperity.”

So what does Sabbath look like? Well, I think we must ask our Jewish brothers and sisters, to see how our forefathers did it. One of my favorite authors is Lauren Winner, an Episcopal Priest who lives in North Carolina. She was raised by Jewish parents who were devoted to practicing their faith but she eventually converted to Christianity as a young adult.

She has a delightful little book called *Mudhouse Sabbath*, I commend it to you all. This book is a meditation on some of the Jewish disciplines and practices that she misses, not incompatibilities, just those things that aren't part of the deep structure of modern Christian church life in America, but, nevertheless, are things she finds very meaningful for the life of faith. And the very first practice she reflects on is Sabbath. Winner says:

*Recently, at a used bookstore, I came across Nan Fink's memoir Stranger in the Midst, the story of her conversion to Judaism. She describes the preparations she and her soon-to-be-husband made for [Sabbath]:*

*On Friday afternoon, at the very last minute, we'd rush home, stopping at the grocery store to pick up supplies. Flying into the kitchen we'd cook ahead for the next twenty-four hours. Soup and salad, baked chicken, yams and applesauce for dinner, and vegetable cholent or lasagna for the next day's lunch. Sometimes I'd think how strange it was to be in such a frenzy to get ready for a day of rest. [Sabbath] preparations have their own rhythm, and once the table was set and the house straightened, the pace began to slow...When I joined Michael and his son for the lighting of the candles, the whole house seemed transformed. Papers and books were neatly piled, flowers stood in a vase on the table, and the golden light of the setting sun filled the room...[Sabbath] is like nothing else. Time as we know it does not exist for these twenty-four hours, and the worries of the week soon fall away. A feeling of joy appears. The smallest object, a leaf or a spoon, shimmers in a soft light, and the heart opens. [Sabbath] is a meditation of unbelievable beauty.*

Sabbath...is like nothing else. It is, without question, essential, and also beautiful.

A month ago my family set off on a camping trip in southwestern Virginia. The prior few weeks had been busy, with normal life keeping us hopping and my work schedule pretty crazy. I'll admit that high energy, stress, anxiety left me feeling a bit unhinged. I needed silence: a lot of it. And I found it! We found it. We arrived at the most beautiful campground on the Blue Ridge Parkway we have ever seen. Once we got our camper set up and settled in, I began to breathe deeply and was able to let go of any thought that wasn't related to enjoying each and every minute in God's creation with my family. That first afternoon, while I was reading a book—for pleasure—my kids and husband went to explore the beauty beyond the bounds of the campground. Just across the parkway sat a hill with a gate and a detectable path. They had ventured across and up and came back absolutely ecstatic. So I put on my tennis shoes and went to see it for myself. When I rounded the bend in the campground road and headed toward the hill, a spectacular view of the mountains materialized right before my eyes. I quickly crossed the

road and slipped through the entryway and hiked to the top of the hill. It was beautiful: cows grazing, a split-rail fence that seemed to go on forever, and wild daffodils spanned the countryside. I began to sense something settle. I just about fell over with the silent majesty of these mountains. The words of Jacob came to mind: "Surely the Lord is in this place, and I was not aware of it. How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven." This thin moment in the mountains was its own gate of heaven. I was delighting in creation. Nothing particularly spectacular or spiritual happened. But I had found my center, a place of rest in God that wasn't at the mercy of my circumstances. Now, to be able to find that place in my everyday life. That is Sabbath practice.

Truly, it is a paradox for us 21<sup>st</sup> Century Christians. Many of us don't naturally choose rest, and, honestly, some of us need to work at resting. I, for one, have to fight for my rest by choosing silence when everything in my mind craves distraction and noise. Resting in God takes practice and intention. Do you long to wake up to a day that stretches out in front of you with nothing in it but rest and delight? Do you long to sit on your couch or on your deck because it is yours, a gift from God that often gets overlooked in the rush of things? Do you long for that leisurely walk or bike ride? Do you long to read a book for pleasure? Do you long to light candles and read Scripture and thank God from the bottom of your heart? Do you long to feel the quietness and peace settle over your house as you and your family enter into a different way of being together in God's presence? Do you long for a rhythm of working and resting that you can count on?

There is an amazing variety of Sabbath possibilities before us. It is vitally important to keep in mind your unique life situation as you work out this part of life. Experiment. Plan with others. Share burdens with each other so we can free ourselves up for time for Sabbath. Make a plan. Follow it. Sabbath is like receiving the gift of a heavy snow day every week. Stores are closed. Roads are impassable. Suddenly you have the gift of a day to do whatever you want. You don't have any obligations, pressures or responsibilities. You have permission to play, be with friends, take a nap, read a good book. Sit and look out the window and be in awe of God's beautiful creation. Few of us would give ourselves a no obligation day. But God does. It's all part of his plan.

Thanks be to God. Amen.