

Rest
Exodus 20:8-11

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August 25, 2019

Early on in their forty-year journey through the desert God spoke to Moses from Mount Sinai and gave the Ten Commandments. One of the commands concerns keeping the Sabbath. At the core of the Sabbath command is this one word: Rest. If you find yourself busy and hustling to keep up and perhaps stressed from the load you carry, if you might even be overwhelmed and struggling to keep your head above water, God has a word for you today. The word is rest. Just to be clear, rest is important to God. As someone has pointed out, when God spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai, he did not offer Ten Suggestions, or Ten Things to Consider, or Ten Helpful Thoughts. You know what God gave on Mount Sinai. God gave commandments. Written in stone.

Even though this is a commandment from God, I also want to be sure we do not miss the intent of the command, which is that we rest. Therefore, I am not going to give you a list of rules and regulations of what it means to keep the commandment of the Sabbath. I am not even going to tell you it has to be a literal day, although if you can keep a day of Sabbath it is a really nice thing. But not everyone can, not in our world that runs 24/7, where stores and restaurants are open on Sunday, when bosses have your cell phone and email, and in many ways, you might be at someone's beckon call. I am not here today to make the Sabbath burdensome. In fact, I think the point of the Sabbath is not to be a burden, but to be a blessing. So if you need some rest, and with it some restoration, and even as I misspelled it when typing for my sermon, a reset...I added an extra e and it showed up as reset instead of rest, and if you find yourself becoming lost in the busyness of life and need re-creation...not just recreation...but re-creation, then God has a good word for you, a good word for us. Rest.

A book on Sabbath I have found very helpful invites us to rest with these words:

“Who is it that can make muddy water clear? Asks the Tao Te Ching. But if allowed to remain still it will gradually become clear of itself. The invitation to rest is rooted in an undeniable spiritual gravity that allows all things at rest to settle, to find their place. There comes a moment in our striving when more effort actually becomes counterproductive, when our frantic busyness only muddies the waters of our wisdom and understanding. When we become still and allow our life to rest, we feel a renewal of energy and gradual clarity of perception. The Psalmist speaks of this: *He makes me lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul.* Here we have another stunning principle undergirding Sabbath time: God does not want us to be exhausted. God wants us to be happy. The practice of Sabbath is designed specifically to restore us, a gift of time in which we allow the cares and concerns of the marketplace to fall away. We set aside time to delight in being alive, to savor the gifts of creation, and to give thanks for the blessings we may have missed in our necessary preoccupation with our work.¹ Rest. Let the muddy waters settle down. Let the important things in life become clear.

Something that becomes clear as we rest in God, as we keep Sabbath, is just how special our life is as humans, how sacred our life is as humans. The command in Exodus 20 is clearly grounded in the creation story from Genesis chapter one. Right in the commandment are these words, “For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore, the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.” That is what God did, working and creating for six days and resting on the seventh. So, as humans, “Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God.” The rest that is Sabbath rest draws us back to the story of God creating the heavens and the earth.

The creation story displays the uniqueness of human life, the sacredness of human life. The creation story displays the uniqueness of your life, the sacredness of your life, and my life. It was in the creation story that God said, “Let us make human beings in our own image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.” So, God created human beings in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created

¹ Wayne Muller, *Sabbath: Restoring the Sacred Rhythm of Rest*, 26.

them. (Genesis 1:26-27) And God blessed them. And God blessed us. And God blessed you. Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy.

“Sabbath is a way of being in time where we remember who we are, remember what we know, and taste the gifts of spirit and eternity. Like a path through the forest, Sabbath creates a marker for ourselves, so if we are lost, we can find our way back to the center. ‘Remember the Sabbath’ means ‘Remember that everything you have received is a blessing. Remember to delight in your life, in the fruits of your labor. Remember to stop and offer thanks for the wonder of it’ Remember, as if we would forget. Indeed, the assumption is that we will forget. And history has proven that, given enough time, we will forget.”²

This little commandment about remembering the Sabbath takes us back to the witness of the bible that says human life is sacred, your life is sacred, my life is sacred, all life is sacred. When we remember that, we are truly blessed. When we forget...that muddy water is dangerous, isn't it? When we forget that human life is sacred...that is dangerous, for us, and for others. We don't see things as they truly are.

The Book of Exodus tells a terrible story about what happens when we do not treat human life as sacred, when we do not recognize and celebrate that all human beings are created in the image of God. Exodus tells the story of a ruler who came to power that did not see the value in the life of others, particularly the people of God, the children of Abraham. The ruler, the king of Egypt, the Pharaoh felt threatened by the Hebrew families, so he set taskmasters over them, to afflict them with their burdens. This Pharaoh worked the children of Israel ruthlessly. Verse 14 in chapter one depicts a cruel existence for the children of Israel. “The Pharaoh made their lives bitter with hard bondage, in mortar, and in brick, and in all manner of service in the field; in all their hard labor he used them ruthlessly.”

This Pharaoh had no sense that all human life was sacred. This Pharaoh had no sense that all human life was special. This Pharaoh had no sense that all human life was blessed by God. But God did not forget his children. We are told God saw their suffering, God heard their cries, God was concerned, and God came down to deliver them. That is the Exodus

² Muller, p. 6.

in a nutshell. God delivered his children from the bondage of slavery and oppression. The importance of this in terms of keeping Sabbath is found when we examine the Ten Commandments as they are given in Deuteronomy. The Ten Commandments are given a second time, just as Deuteronomy means second law. In Exodus 20 the command to keep Sabbath is rooted in the six days of creation and God's resting on the seventh day. In Deuteronomy 5:12-15 the Sabbath command sounds very familiar in content, but the reason given for keeping the Sabbath is different than in Exodus.

“Observe the Sabbath day and keep it holy, as the Lord your God commanded you. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, or your son or daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock, or the resident alien in your towns, so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you. Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore, the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day.”

Israel's experience of being delivered from slavery drives the Sabbath command in Deuteronomy. Creation sparks the Sabbath command in Exodus 20. In Deuteronomy it is the deliverance from bondage that calls the people to Sabbath remembrance. The Sabbath command in Deuteronomy shows that when the image of God is defaced and dehumanized, when people are enslaved and oppressed, when their lives are bitter, God delivers them from such cruel and inhumane injustice. In Sabbath two great experiences are at work. The memory of being created in the image of God calls Israel to remember the Sabbath. The memory of being set free from the dehumanizing bondage of slavery calls Israel to remember the Sabbath. Sabbath is both rest and restoration. Deliverance sets people free to live once again as God's beloved children. And we must be careful not to miss the broad practice of Sabbath in Deuteronomy. Not only does God call the Israelites to practice Sabbath as a result of their great deliverance. Israel is called to extend that Sabbath rest and restoration to their children, their animals, to the resident aliens, and to their male and female slaves.

Think of what it must have been like as an Israelite, in the wilderness, to hear this command about keeping Sabbath. They were just months from that horrible existence in Egypt. They had endured generations of suffering. They knew nothing else, except that life was hard and bitter and their masters were cruel and inhumane. Now God gives commands. Buckle up, here it comes, more requirements, more rules, more regulations, more labor, more hardship, more struggle. That is how masters treat their servants. Imagine how strange and marvelous it must have been for the children of Israel to hear that their God, their Master, their Lord, commanded them to rest. And not just rest, but rest in ways that help you remember your life has meaning and purpose, dignity and honor. You were created in God's very own image. Rest in ways that cause you to reflect on the great miracle that when you were enslaved, God cared enough to set you free, to give you a new life. Others saw you only for what you could produce, and they squeezed every drop of blood, sweat, and tears out of you. Your new Master, your new Lord, your God, your Creator, your Redeemer, your Sustainer, your God told you to rest. Your God told you to remember that life is a gift. Your God told you that life is valuable. Your God told you that life is sacred. Your God told you that life is good.

If the waters of your life are muddy, the answer is probably not to do more, to work harder, to try harder, to stress out more, to get anxious, to hurry, and to make more commitments. God seems to think the way to find still water is through Sabbath, through rest, intentional rest, rest that calls us back to our roots as being created in the image of God, and rest that restores us through the great witness that the one who loves us has redeemed us from the bondage of a world that can be ruthless and a life that can be bitter.

“The story is told of a South American tribe that went on a long march, day after day, when all of a sudden they would stop walking, sit down to rest for a while, and then make camp for a couple of days before going any farther. They explained that they needed the time of rest so that their souls could catch up with them.”³

³ Muller, p. 70.

As we head into our last weekend of the summer, fittingly called Labor Day, God holds up a STOP sign for us. It is called the Sabbath. STOP and rest. STOP and let your soul catch up. STOP and find the restoration that comes from remembering who you are and whose you are.

Sabbath: Restoring the Sacred Rhythm of Rest is written by Wayne Muller. This helpful book explores the theology behind the Sabbath command, and it introduces numerous practices that help to enter in and experience Sabbath rest. I knew I was going to love the book when I found it sprinkled with some gentle humor. Like the young Jewish man who told this story:

“When Sheila and I were married, her grandparents gave us a brand-new washer and dryer. It was a very generous gift, and we were very grateful to receive such a blessing for our new home. But when they presented them to us, her grandfather explained that this was a Jewish washer and dryer. ‘What makes them Jewish?’ I asked, naively. Sheila’s grandfather replied with a twinkle, ‘They won’t work on Shabbat.’” The joke serves a purpose. Following the joke, we read of a woman named Dorothy who works for a pharmaceutical company. While she will work long and hard during the week, often staying late or working extra hours, she always leaves work at five on Friday...no matter what. She has arranged with her employer that she will be efficient and devoted while there, but will be completely finished and gone by five. Then she goes home to her husband; their children are grown, and so they share a quiet, intimate meal, and begin their Sabbath time—usually a mixture of reading, retreat, walking, and time with friends. That brief example from one person’s life leads to this practice.

“Sabbath can only begin if we close the factory, turn out the lights, turn off the computer, and withdraw from the concerns of the marketplace. Choose at least one heavily used appliance or device—the telephone, television, computer, washer and dryer—and let them rest for a Sabbath period. Whether it is a morning, afternoon, or entire day, surrender to a quality of time when you will not be disturbed, seduced, or responsive to what our technologies have to offer. Notice how you respond to its absence.”⁴

⁴ Muller, pgs. 28, 29.

Almost as if the author anticipates our strong reaction to turning our technological tools off the next chapter is titled *Legalism and the Dreary Sabbath*. Oh, now that is a Sabbath with which we are too familiar. Don't do this, don't do that, and most importantly, do not have fun or enjoy the Sabbath. Not true. Not true. In fact, the chapter on legalistic and dreary Sabbaths ends with something joyful and life-giving...something we Presbyterians do well, a meal...a Sabbath Meal. "A simple way to begin Sabbath time is with a meal, alone or shared with those we love. One of my favorite meals was always the one we shared after church on Sundays when I was in college. A good friend had been ordained as a Presbyterian minister (See!), and a dozen of us would tumble into her house after church, put on some rock and roll, make sandwiches, pile up snacks and drinks, and eat around a big table. We ate and talked and laughed and played all day long into night. It was my first real introduction to a joyful Sabbath". If a Sabbath meal inspires you, these words instruct on what a Sabbath meal might look like. "Prepare a Sabbath meal, alone or with friends or family. Shop for the ingredients, choosing those that bring you the most pleasure. This food is not so much for survival as for sheer, savory delight. Put on some music. Turn off the phone. Take as much time as you like to feel, taste, smell each ingredient, every spice, bread, and vegetable. Decorate the table with flowers, colorful placemats and candles. Say a prayer. Give thanks, remembering all the people who grew, harvested, packed, shipped, and sold them for you. Give thanks for the bounty of the earth. Enjoy."⁵

Enjoy. Give thanks. Pray. Stop. Remember. Rest. Breathe. Breathe in and feel yourself once again in the hands of God, the one who created you, feel God breathing his breath into you, breathing his Spirit into you, breathing life into you. Not a dreary Sabbath. Not a legalistic Sabbath. Not a burdensome Sabbath. Rest. Enjoy. Remember.

The story about the tribe that stopped so their spirits could catch up is part of a chapter that emphasizes how helpful a Sabbath walk can be. A Sabbath walk isn't about getting somewhere, it is about being present as you gently move, reflecting on life, on God, on blessings, on disappointments, on faith, on love. A Sabbath walk doesn't even have to be a physical walk. Working on this Sabbath sermon led me to take one

⁵ Muller, p. 33.

of my favorite walks. It is a walk that I remember so well I can take it in my mind, which is what I did.

High up in the Sierra Nevada mountains near the camp my parents took us to every summer is a little treasure of a place my mom called Bubble Pool. I would scamper down the hill from our cabin and find the small stream that flowed into our lake. Hiking on the trail or sneaking down to the water and hopping stone to stone I would make my way up the stream to a hidden, and in my mind secret place my mother had showed me. It was called Bubble Pool. The wide river narrowed as it came to a small waterfall, which dropped down into a pool that was cool and crystal clear. Taking my shoes off I would dip my feet in the water. I would listen to the birds and other animals. The bushes had blossoms. Sometimes I would catch a shadow of a trout as it darted in and out of the light. When I walked to Bubble Pool as a child, it was a place of safety, security, of wonder and awe, of peace and contentment, of joy and gratitude. Now as I make an imaginary journey in my mind I look in the water and see a reflection...I see a child, a child who knew he was loved, who knew he was protected and cared for, a child who knew he had a family and a home. I might walk to Bubble Pool all by myself, but at Bubble Pool I am never alone. My mom and dad, my brothers and sisters, now Julie and our kids, and a little baby girl who bears my mother's name, Clara and loved ones...Bubble Pool is a good Sabbath walk for me. Bubble Pool reminds me who I am, and whose I am.

We finish our time of worship today by taking a walk. I pray it might be a Sabbath walk for you. It is a beautiful walk. And as you walk this Sabbath walk, you are not alone. We are never alone. Today, on a day when we have heard a commandment to rest and to find restoration, come and walk with the one whose love for you will never end. Find rest for your weary soul. Come and take a walk in the garden.