

Rest From and For
Deuteronomy 5:12 – 15; Mark 2:23 – 3:6
June 3, 2018

Poet Langston Hughes once wrote, “I am so tired of waiting, aren’t you, for the world to become good and beautiful and kind?” He wrote that sometime in the 1930s, and now over 80 years later, it resonates as deeply as ever with us. Because we are *still* waiting, and we are *still* tired. It resonates with us in the constant news reports of the latest act of terrorism and rumors of war. It resonates with us when we hear about yet another school shooting. It resonates in the partisan political fighting that so fiercely divides our country. It resonates with us when we hear the news of unaccompanied migrant children being detained and kept in cages or simply *lost* by the system, many of them, they fear, to human trafficking and forced labor. It resonates with us when we hear about the latest celebrity or politician behaving badly through sexual misconduct or racism. Or when we see racist language and behavior being so brazenly displayed in the public arena. Or when we hear the news that the death toll in Puerto Rico from Hurricane Maria is far higher than initially thought, and that that eight months later, tens of thousands of people are still without power as another hurricane season begins. Or when we hear that *each day* 22 veterans take their own lives because they cannot get the mental health help that they need after experiencing the trauma of war.

I am so tired of waiting, aren’t you, for the world to become good and beautiful and kind?

The good news is that into the weariness of our waiting, God extends the invitation to Sabbath. Sabbath comes from the Hebrew word *shabbat*, which means, “to cease or rest.” We often think of Sabbath, if we think of it at all, as a day off. A time to rest from our labors, take a break, rest our bodies, and recharge our batteries. Or a time to worship. And all of those things are a *part* of Sabbath. But Jesus says, “Come to me, all you who are weary and are carrying heavy

burdens, and I will give you *rest*...for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your *souls*” (Matt. 11:28–29). So Sabbath is not just a day of rest for our *bodies*, a time off from work and physical demands. It is also a time in which we find rest for our *souls*, relief from the weariness and burdens that weigh on our hearts and minds. It is a day on which God invites us (or *commands* us, according to scripture) to lay down all that which exhausts our bodies and our minds and our spirits, and to find freedom and healing and peace in God.

We see in our reading from Deuteronomy God commanding Moses and the people of Israel to observe the Sabbath. “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.” So this commandment was *given*, and then the people of Israel had to figure out, “Okay, well, what does that *mean*? Can we *cook food* on the Sabbath? Can we gather wood, is *that* work?” There were all these questions about what they *could* and *could not* do.

So the Jewish rabbis and religious leaders had to figure out what counts as work and what doesn't. They said, “No, you can't *cook* on the Sabbath, because that's work. You can't sew. You can't walk more than a certain number of miles on the Sabbath. You can't harvest food, that's work.” Even today, there are some Orthodox Jews who will not use electricity on the Sabbath, because it is the modern equivalent of lighting a fire, which is prohibited on the Sabbath because that counts as work. But also, when you turn on a light, that electricity *comes from somewhere*, and you are responsible for someone at a power plant having to work.

So, you can see, observing the Sabbath became a lot of *work*. All these rules started to pile up, and you had to *keep* them, because *breaking* the Sabbath was punishable by *death*. That's how seriously they took this. The idea of Sabbath was *central* to their understanding of what it meant

to be the people of God. Because, the thinking went, “If we forget *Sabbath*, we forget *God*, who created us and liberated us from slavery in Egypt.” So what happened was, groups like the Pharisees became very committed to making sure that Jewish people kept the law and observed the Sabbath. The Pharisees were not the “bad guys,” as they often get painted in our reading of scripture (because we frequently see them opposing Jesus). The Pharisees were very faithful people whose whole purpose was to help *the people of Israel* be faithful by keeping God’s commandments. It was hard to remember and understand all these different interpretations of the law, so that’s why the Pharisees existed, to help people understand and observe the teachings of God.

Now, over time, what happened was that you became so focused on following all those *rules* that it’s like the whole point of Sabbath became *keeping Sabbath*. They began treating the idea of Sabbath as an *end* in and of itself, rather than as a *means* to an end. It’s not just rest for the sake of rest or worship for the sake of worship. Author James Brashler writes that Sabbath is “so much more than ceasing to work. It is also being refreshed and renewed by activities that enrich our lives and honor God our creator.”¹ The intention of Sabbath is not just to do *nothing*. It is a time of rest and renewal in order to *do something*.

This is where Jesus comes into the story. He and his disciples are walking through a field on the sabbath, and they start picking heads of grain because they’re hungry. The Pharisees see this and say, “They are doing what is not lawful on the sabbath.” Jesus points them back to a story about King David, *before* he became king, when King Saul wanted to kill him, so he was a fugitive, running away from Saul to save his life. David and his companions took the bread that had been

¹ James Brashler, “Sabbath Observance” in *The Presbyterian Outlook*, September 17, 2017.

consecrated for God and ate that. Now, that was in violation of the law (only the *priests* could eat that bread), but the priest *allowed* it, thus nourishing and sustaining David's life.

Jesus draws a parallel between David and himself, suggesting that such violations of the law are acceptable when they promote a person's well-being and nourish and sustain their life. And Jesus says to them, "*We* were not made for the sabbath. The *sabbath* was made for *us*." Rabbis later came to echo Jesus' words and express it this way, "The Sabbath is handed over to you, not you to it," and you may "profane one Sabbath for a person's sake, so that he may keep many [*more*] Sabbaths."² Jesus is reminding them of the *intention* of Sabbath, the bigger picture *purpose* of why God gave it to us.

Then Jesus enters the synagogue and finds a man who has a withered hand. The Pharisees are watching him to see what he's going to do, because healing on the Sabbath is forbidden. Jesus says to them, "Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath; to save life or to kill?" He's essentially saying, "If I neglect this man just because it's the Sabbath, does that truly honor God? While if I *heal* him, I may be breaking the law, but I am loving my neighbor and honoring God." So he heals the man, and in doing so reminds us that the purpose of Sabbath is to nourish and sustain life.

God gives us Sabbath, a day of rest from our work and all that which burdens us, *so that* we might be renewed and restored to *continue working*, continue honoring God by serving those around us, nourishing and sustaining *their* lives. Because the focus of Sabbath is not just on *me* getting the rest that *I* need. Theologian Karoline Lewis says it this way, "Sabbath...reorients us to enter into Monday and a new week looking for ways in which we might renew and restore the

² https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3667

lives of others. Keeping the Sabbath,” she says, “is not just about *your* rest, but that of those all around you.”³

We see this reflected in the reading from Deuteronomy, where God commands *not just the people of Israel* to observe the Sabbath. God *also* says that “on the seventh day you shall not do any work – you, or your son or your 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 *they* may have rest as well as *you*.” God gives rest to those who have no rest, protection under the law to those who have no protection, so that those who are overlooked and oppressed might be renewed and restored, too.

Karoline Lewis goes on to say that “we need to be told again and again that the Sabbath is not just for our personal well-being but for the abundant life of the other.” It’s not just about going to worship or taking a nap. “If you keep the Sabbath,” she says, “you don’t get to overlook those whose lives are being threatened on a daily basis. If you keep the Sabbath, you don’t get to pass over how the lives of others are being stripped of their worth and dignity. If you keep the Sabbath, you don’t have qualifiers or quantifiers for who deserves abundant life.” We need Sabbath, she says, so that we can “remain tireless, relentless, and persistent in our pursuit of life *for all*.”⁴

So when we are tired of waiting for the world to become good and beautiful and kind, Sabbath is God’s way of saying, “Come to me, find nourishment and renewal for your body and your mind and your spirit, so that you can go out and *help* the world become good and beautiful and kind.”

Michelle Francé-Donnay says that “The Sabbath is for noticing – noticing that God is present,

³ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=5169>

⁴ Ibid.

noticing that we have been healed, noticing that our neighbor has been healed. The Sabbath is a reminder to...be alert to what happens when Light shines forth from darkness and God beholds us. Stretch out your hand, and see that what has [withered] has been made whole in Christ's dying and rising."⁵

So as we come to this table and share this meal that God has so lovingly provided, may you be nourished and sustained – body and spirit – so that you can nourish and sustain others, in Jesus' name.



⁵ Michelle Franci-Donnay, "Stretch Out Your Hand" in *Sick, and You Cared for Me: Homilies and Reflections for Cycle B*, pg. 181.