

Playing the Rests
Deuteronomy 5:12–15; Ecclesiastes 3:1–8, 11, 14; Luke 23:50–56
Sunday, May 3, 2020 (Easter 4)

The other week, I was putting one of our kids to bed. We prayed and sang a song, and then as I was tucking them in, I said something like, “Get a good night’s sleep so we can finish up the school week with a good day tomorrow.” And they looked at me and said, “Wait...tomorrow’s *Friday?*” I said, “Yeah, what did you *think* it was?” And they said, “I don’t know. I thought it was like Wednesday or something.” And it occurred to me that with this total upheaval in their schedule and with not physically *going* to school, each day looked just like the one before it, and they had *no idea* what day it was.

Have any of you experienced that over these past couple of months? Because I know *I* have. We can get into this monotonous routine where every day looks just like the one before it, they all start to blur together, and we lose our sense of time.

It’s like with music. If you play all the notes the same, one after the other, they just blur into each other, and there’s no rhythm. We have to inject a sense of *timing* into the notes, and the way we *do* that is by adding *rests*. So what *would* sound monotonous now starts to have more of a rhythm. There’s a term that musicians use. They say, “You have to *play* the *rests*.” When you have a rest in your music, it’s not just a time where nothing happens. It’s a part of the song that is essential *to* the song, so you have to know how to incorporate it *into* the song. It’s the idea that knowing when *not* to play is just as important as knowing when *to* play. So that when you “play the rest,” you inject a sense of timing and rhythm into what you’re doing.

And, of course, it’s not just music. God has instilled creation with a natural sense of timing and rhythm. The writer of Ecclesiastes says that, “For everything there is a season, and a time for

every matter under heaven. A time to be born, and a time to die. A time to plant, and a time to harvest. A time to mourn, and a time to dance. A time to weep, and a time to laugh. God has made everything suitable for its time.” Certain things happen at certain times. There are certain seasons for certain things, whether it’s the actual seasons (spring, summer, fall, and winter), or whether it’s the more metaphorical “season of our lives” (the right time for this thing to happen). We don’t plant crops in November; it’s not *time* for that yet. We don’t *harvest* crops in April; they wouldn’t be *ready* yet. We don’t go swimming outside in January. It’s not *time* for that yet.

God has injected a sense of timing and rhythm into this world and into our lives, and the way that God has *done* that is by adding *rests*. The Hebrew word for “rest” is *shabbat*, and it’s where we get the word *sabbath*. We hear it in this reading from Deuteronomy, when God is giving the law to Moses and the people of Israel. God says, “Observe the *yom shabbat* (the day of rest) and 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; 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 town, so that *they* may rest as well as you.”

The people of Israel were leaving Egypt, where they had been slaves for 400 years, and all they did, every single day, was make bricks. Sunday through Monday, make bricks. No days off. Just make bricks all day, every single day. And I would imagine that the days just kind of blurred into one another. “What are we doing today? We’re making more bricks. Same thing as yesterday.” So God says, “I want you to *remember* that you aren’t *slaves* anymore – you aren’t defined by what you *do* or how much you *produce* – and the way you’re going to remember that is by taking a day off and resting. Everyone is just going to *stop*, so that you can catch your breath and rediscover my rhythm in your life.”

This is where I found myself the other week. I shared with you in a letter how Ridgley and I had been working every day since all of this started. We were having to figure out a new routine with making these videos. It took *a lot* more time than in-person worship does. There was always something that had to be done, each day. As much as we tried to plan ahead, it just never worked out. And we kept saying to each other, “Once we figure this out and get into a rhythm, things will slow down and get easier.” But they *didn't*. And after a month of that – just that non-stop, one after the other, day after day, with Holy Week added on top of it – we both realized that we were both completely exhausted. Easter, for me, didn't really feel like Easter, because I didn't have a sense of what *day* it was. It just felt the same as every day before it. I had lost a sense of rhythm and timing in my life. I needed to *rest*.

So I took a week off. And it's not like it was a week “off,” because we still had to teach the kids every day. But what happened was, I injected a *rest* into each day. So instead of wake up, school, go to church, work, go home, dinner, walk, put the kids to bed, read, go to bed, it became wake up, school, rest...dinner, walk, kids to bed, read, go to bed. And within that rest, sometimes I worked in the yard, sometimes I watched a movie, sometimes I literally sat around the house and did *nothing*. I played that rest, because in life, like in music, knowing when *not* to play is just as important as knowing when *to* play. And by the end of that week, I was feeling rested and renewed – I had rediscovered the *rhythm* in my life. When I came back on Monday, it didn't feel like that constant barrage anymore. It felt *better*.

And what it made me think about was this story in Luke's gospel. This is such an overlooked part of the Easter story, but it's *so important*. Jesus has been crucified, he has died, and they have put him in the tomb. The sun is going down on Friday, which marked the beginning of the

Jewish sabbath. So it says that the women prepared spices and ointments, and on the sabbath they rested according to the commandment. Jesus died on Friday. They did what they needed to do. And then on Saturday, they did *nothing*. They rested.

They had things they *wanted* to do. *Good* things. They wanted to anoint Jesus' body as a part of the burial process. But they *waited*. They kept the sabbath. They played the rest. And it was *after* that, when they went back to the tomb on *Sunday*, that they discovered it was empty. Think about that – if they had gone to the tomb on *Saturday* because, “This has to happen *now*. I need to do this *now*. I can't take a day off. This can't wait. If *I* don't do this, *nobody's* going to do this.” – then they wouldn't have discovered the empty tomb and encountered the risen Christ. It wasn't *time* for that yet. But they *rested*, and *then* went to the tomb, and met the risen Christ.

They couldn't get to *Sunday* without *Saturday*. They couldn't experience *resurrection* without *rest*. That's one of the things that this story shows us. Rest leads to resurrection. When we can *stop* and step out of the endless, monotonous cycles that we have been caught up in, then *we* can come away feeling renewed, restored, and resurrected. Jewish theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel calls Sabbath, “an opportunity to mend our tattered lives.”¹ It's about picking up the pieces, putting things back together, and being made *whole* again. Rest leads to resurrection.

Now, I think the *question* for us is, “What does that look like *now*, in this time of quarantine and isolation?” Some of us might be experiencing the pressure and stress of this time and thinking, “I have so much that I need to do, but I can't do it all because of these restrictions that have been placed on us. I can't get all of my work done. I can't go here or do *this* or do *that*.” For some of us, this is an *anxious* time that does not feel very restful. But for others, you might be feeling

¹ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath*, pg. 17.

that there is *too much* down time. Not *enough* to do. The days are blurring together because you can't go anywhere or see anyone, and there is just this constant boredom and loneliness borne out of our isolation. Some of us might be saying, "How are we supposed to *rest* when we're not *doing* anything? I want *more* to do." What does sabbath look like for us now?

Back in March, I came across a poem that was written at the very beginning of all this. It's called "Pandemic" and was written by a poet named Lynn Ungar. She writes:

What if you thought of it
as the Jews consider the Sabbath—
the most sacred of times?
Cease from travel.
Cease from buying and selling.
Give up, just for now,
on trying to make the world
different than it is.
Sing. Pray. Touch only those
to whom you commit your life.
Center down.

And when your body has become still,
reach out with your heart.
Know that we are connected
in ways that are terrifying and beautiful.
(You could hardly deny it now.)
Know that our lives
are in one another's hands.
(Surely, that has come clear.)
Do not reach out your hands.
Reach out your heart.
Reach out your words.
Reach out all the tendrils
of compassion that move, invisibly,
where we cannot touch.

Promise this world your love--
for better or for worse,
in sickness and in health,
so long as we all shall live.

You might be *doing* right now, but are you reaching out with your *heart*, your *words*, your *compassion*, your *love*? Or, your body might be still right now, but are you reaching out with

your *heart*? That's the whole point of sabbath in the first place – to still our bodies as an act of love for God and our neighbors. As much as we might want to *do* right now, maybe the best way we can show love for God and our neighbor is by doing *nothing*.

I came across a quote this week that says, “You are only unproductive by the standards of the world we lived in two months ago. And that world is gone now.”

Sabbath is about breaking out of *all* the cycles we get stuck in so that we can be renewed. So if your life right now is, “Go, go go. I don't have enough time. I need to do *more*,” then how can you change rhythm of your life so that you can get back in touch with the things that really matter? How can you inject a rest? Or if your life right now is *too much* rest, then how can you use this time to inject something new and break up that monotony and find a new rhythm? Can you use this downtime to connect with a friend or loved one or *God* in a new way?

We all need find ways to play this rest that we have been given. To view this, not as a time of unproductivity, but as a time of *sabbath*. Because it is *through sabbath* that we come to encounter the risen Christ. *Rest* leads to *resurrection*.