

Matthew 11:28-30 and
Deuteronomy 5:12-15
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Sabbath Practice

As we begin our three weeks looking at sabbath together this morning, we are going to try something different. Sabbath comes from the Hebrew word for stop or pause, so we are going to pause in the midst of worship for about two minutes of quiet between the reading of the second lesson and the sermon. You cannot do this wrong. If you find yourself needing to cough or sneeze or even fidget or shift in your seat, you have not messed things up. There is ample blank space in the bulletin for you to doodle or draw—maybe not for grocery lists or to-do lists. These two minutes are intended to be a time to breathe, reflect, pray, or rest. [Read Matthew 11:28-30, followed by silence]

I'm curious how those two minutes felt. Long? Not long enough? Uncomfortable? Delightful? Even in a space where we expect quiet pauses, two minutes can feel like an awfully long pause. We are so accustomed to noise, to busyness, to production, to content, and to activity that a two-minute interruption of silence can feel like a lifetime. I guess being quiet takes practice, at least for me.

“Come to me all who are weary and carrying heavy burdens.” Each time I read those words, I can feel my body respond. My shoulders grow a bit less tense, and I exhale. The word *sabbath* seems to have the opposite effect on many of us. When I mention the concept of sabbath—especially among certain generations, I can count on just about everyone tensing up and maybe even groaning. In a bible study a few years ago, my mentioning sabbath led to a discussion about Sunday drives to visit relatives, no roller skating, and sitting and listening to adults while wearing Sunday clothes and trying to hold your breath and keep from squirming just

long enough to be rewarded with special cookies. The sabbath memories carried memories of so many “no’s” and off-limits. Sabbath had become a weight, a burden.

But that’s not how it started, and I’m convinced that that is not how it has to be. Over the next few weeks, we’ll look more closely at the notion of sabbath and what form it takes—or can take—for us as individuals and as a community. But before we can do any sort of deep dive, it might help if we look at how this practice began. The Ten Commandments are first given to the people Israel as they wander in the desert. They have been enslaved for generations and now as they make their way toward the Promised Land, God calls them into covenant. God promises to be their God and invites them to promise to be God’s people, and there are ground rules. At the top of the list is the call to worship God and God alone. There are others of course, several “thou shall not” commands, but then there is the one we’re focused on for today, and unlike “you shall not murder,” this one is a bit longer. It is also stated in the affirmative. Instead of a “don’t,” sabbath is a “do,” one that was not an option before. Sabbath is a mark of a free people. As enslaved people, they measured their days in bricks and beatings, with no break unless the taskmaster gave them one. They had no agency over their schedule. Pharaoh’s demands set the agenda; the empire’s claims got top billing—the only billing really. There was not room or time for anything else. And now, as they stand at the edge of the Promised Land, God wants to remind them who they are called to be and what they are to be about. Like us, they are a people defined first and foremost by their covenant with God, and God calls them to live out that covenant in the rhythm of their days and weeks. This covenant informs and shapes what they do and what they do not do. God’s people are to devote their hearts first and foremost to the Lord of all. They keep their promises and care for their elders. They tell the truth. They don’t waste their days pining away for their neighbor’s house or livestock or spouse or beach house or bank account or four-

car garage. And they step off the treadmill and stop. One day a week they step away and pause, because, thanks to God, they can. They are no longer enslaved because God has liberated them from Pharaoh. They are free people, *freed* people because of God, so they are to set aside one day out of seven for rest and worship, two precious luxuries enslaved people never imagined.

The ancient Israelites who enter the Promised Land are not actually enslaved themselves, of course; they are the grandchildren and great-grandchildren of those who were. And yet as they stand on the edge of a new chapter, God still insists that Moses make it clear how they are called to live in this new land, in this new chapter. They will not live in a bubble. They will not be living with a blank slate. The people of ancient Israel are a mighty but small band compared to the peoples around them. The larger world's rhythms and patterns are seductive and persuasive. And yet in every age, it is this relationship with the Lord of the Universe that ultimately defines them. In the midst of other peoples and practices, they are called to live out loud as the children of God. And one way the children of God do this is by drawing a clear boundary for themselves around a day for rest and worship. As the *Sesame Street* song goes, "One of these things is not like the other..." And neither are we.

Sabbath is a gift of God for the people of God, a call to step away from the tugs of the other six days and welcome a chance to breathe, to rest, to pull our noses from the grindstone and lift our eyes to see and savor the life God gives us. Because that's just it: life is a gift, no matter how hard we have worked or how many hours we have billed or how many years we have logged, life has been given to us. We do not make air fill our lungs or blood cells carry oxygen to our tissues. We do not cause the sun to rise or the moon to wane. We can take no credit for the rush of hummingbird wings or the taste of a ripe peach. If we only move through our days at breakneck speed, if we spend every precious breath pointing out how others get it wrong—

whatever “it” may be, if we insist on filling every moment with noise or busyness, we risk forgetting who we are and whose we are. We are no longer enslaved, but to look at our calendars, our blood pressure, our to-do lists, our Facebook feeds, or our clenched jaws, it might be hard for us or anyone else to believe it.

And that’s where I think that deep exhale comes from when I hear that text from Matthew. You and I live in a 24/7 world, a world that has no real interest in sabbath, which makes our need for sabbath all the more profound. Some people actually cheered the first few weeks of quarantine because we were all forced to stop. But after a few weeks, most of us began to chafe at the forced pause. Now that the pandemic has receded a bit, it is almost as though we are busier than ever. All of the commitments, all of the expectations for productivity have ramped up to the nth degree. Some have even talked about this summer’s travel surge as “revenge travel.”¹ And we’re worn out. Not too long ago, the world around us somewhat played at protecting the sabbath, at least for some of us. And I imagine I am not alone in grieving the ways the world around us no longer carves out space for sabbath for us. Stores are open on Sunday; soccer games are played on Sunday; shifts and meetings and swim meets are scheduled for Sunday. And it does not help to shame parents or families or anyone else for a tidal wave over which they have little to no control. We used to be able to lean on the larger culture to carve out time for regular weekly rest and worship and renewal for us. We no longer can. And that’s a loss. I wonder if it could also be an opportunity...an invitation, even.

We are God’s beloved ones in the midst of God’s beloved ones, in the thick of God’s broken and beloved world. Too often, though, we play by the larger world’s rules and follow the dominant culture’s script. Sabbath is an invitation to go a different way. For all of its glitz and

¹ <https://www.thetravel.com/what-is-revenge-travel-and-is-it-coming-back/>

glam, for all of its insistence that our life is incomplete without this or that, the larger world is not really all that concerned with what is truly good for us. **God is.** There will always be a new thing that we must be outraged about this very second and another thing that the culture tells us we absolutely must have to enjoy a full life. God understands that no one and nothing else can bring us the rest we need, that no one and nothing else can free us from all that would claim us, that nothing and no one else ultimately has our best interest at heart like God does.

So if I believe that sabbath is a gift, an invitation to let down my burdens and if I believe that sabbath is an encouragement to pattern my moments around God's timing, what exactly does that look like? What shape does it take? Other than calling us to stop one day a week, to let others stop, too, and to savor this stopping as something sacred, God leaves sabbath blessedly open. It is almost as if the God who fashions us knows that what restores and refreshes us will not be one-size-fits-all. Worship is one significant piece of the sabbath puzzle; there are other pieces, too. There are things to consider pausing, like email, social media, phone calls, to-do lists, breaking news, worrying about everyone and everything. There are things to say "yes," to as well, invitations to savor the life God showers upon us, life which is a gift, not a given. So we say "no," we pause, and that pausing gives us room to say "yes". Maybe baking or gardening makes your heart sing. Maybe a leisurely hike or an afternoon standing in the middle of a mountain stream with a fly rod is your thing. Maybe a walk or a run or lying in a hammock helps you exhale. Maybe dancing in your living room or sitting in your favorite chair with a mug of your favorite tea or a lazy game of Candy Land with a grandchild or a picnic with a spouse or an ice cream cone with your four-legged friend is the very thing to help you breathe again. Whatever it is, over the next few weeks, I want to invite you, invite us to find a way to be intentional about pausing and embracing sabbath, not as a burden, but as a gift. The news will

continue to unfold, the to-do list will grow, and the demands will continue to pile up and pile on. There will always be a crisis vying for our attention and an urgent need demanding our energy. Those won't stop, but we must—not simply because God commands it, but because God knows we need it, especially if we are going to continue doing the holy work of sharing God's grace, love, and mercy in and for God's hurting world.

“Observe the Sabbath and keep it holy.” “Come to me all who are weary, and I will give you rest.” Breathe deeply. Exhale fully. We are no longer enslaved. We are God's beloved children. God knows what is good for us. God wants what is good for us. We have permission to stop every so often and savor that good news, to rest in that promise. In fact, we are commanded to. It just may take some practice.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.