

## **“The Crime and Blessing Our World Forgot”**

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Based upon Exodus 31:12-17; Mark 2:23-28

One of the things that people often do not understand about preachers is that most of the time when we preach, we are preaching to ourselves as much or more as to the congregations we address. Today's subject of Sabbath-keeping is no exception. Most people think that keeping the Sabbath means going to worship. But although worship is critical to discipleship, in the Bible Sabbath-keeping is primarily about rest, not worship. It's about stopping work, stopping trying to accomplish things, and resting in the stillness of God's grace. So let me just confess up front what you probably already know to be true: I am not a great Sabbath-keeper. There was a time when I was much better, but I fell off the wagon, so to speak, a few years ago and have not yet fully recovered my old, more faithful rhythm. Please do not think, therefore, that I am up here as someone who has figured this out and is judging you for your lack of faithfulness. Instead, I invite you to join me in striving to embrace what the Spirit has to say to us about the very important subject of rest.

Anne Morrow Lindbergh, in her wonderful little book, Gift from the Sea, wrote, “If women were convinced that a day off or an hour of solitude was a reasonable ambition, they would find a way of attaining it. As it is, they feel so unjustified in their demand that they rarely make the attempt.”<sup>1</sup> Although women may be slightly more compulsive in this regard than many men, I think that in our time, her words apply to the majority of people, not just to women. We live in a time when 24/7 is not just an ideal, it is the expectation. We live in a time when “busy” has replaced “fine” as the most common response to “How are you?”, even among people who are retired. We live in a time when people who get only a measly two weeks of vacation a year still do not feel it is reasonable or doable to take it. In our culture, the idea of taking a full day off every week to rest in stillness and peace sounds much more like a pipe dream than a justifiable practice. Who has the time, right?

According to Scripture, however, Sabbath-keeping is way more than a nice idea; it's a critical practice God believes is essential to faithful discipleship. In fact, when God introduced the idea to the people of Israel in the wilderness, God felt it was so important that according to the *Book of Exodus*, God made it a capital offense not to do so! Can you imagine today if we executed people for not taking a day off each week? There would be no one under seventy and over five left! Now we don't have evidence that the Israelites ever executed people for breaking the Sabbath either. But the fact that breaking the Fourth Commandment to keep the Sabbath was a capital offense, at least in principle, tells us up front that we should be taking Sabbath-keeping far more seriously than we do. God not only thinks it is reasonable or justifiable to rest, God thinks it is life-threateningly important.

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<sup>1</sup> Lindbergh, Anne Morrow, Gift from the Sea (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983), 49 (original copyright was 1955).

But why? Why rank resting each week right up there with the biggies like not worshipping other gods, making idols, murdering people, or stealing their things? According to the version of the Ten Commandments which appears in *Deuteronomy*, the reason has to do with sovereignty and economy. *Deuteronomy* 5:15 says, “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 [sic] day.” When God led the people into the Promised Land and covenanted with them to make them into a great nation, God wanted them to build that nation according to God’s economy, not Pharaoh’s. One of the big differences between the two is that in God’s economy, human value is not tied to productiveness. In Pharaoh’s economy it was. The value of a Hebrew slave depended exclusively on how many bricks he or she could make. But in God’s kingdom, human value is based upon God’s love. We are valuable because God loves us, not because of how much work we can do for God. So God wanted to make that obvious to the world. Every week when the people took a full day off, outsiders would say, “Wow, who do you work for that you are allowed to play with your kids, watch the clouds, or read the newspaper all day?” And the people of Israel would say, “Yahweh is our sovereign. To our Lord we are more valuable than the sum total of all we can produce.”

There are plenty of people today who work around the clock seven days a week because they are enslaved to modern pharaohs. The tech and news industries in our age in particular are notorious for expecting people to be on the clock all the time. You are only as good as your last brick to them. Moreover, since jobs are hard to come by, and since we all need jobs to not just to pay the mortgage and eat, but also to afford health insurance, many people do not feel that they can risk challenging the pharaohs who torment them. They love God, but they feel like Sandra Bullock’s character in the movie *Speed*. A bad guy had rigged a bomb to the bus she was driving, so that if she ever went less than 55 miles per hour, the bus would blow up. A lot of people today feel that they simply cannot risk the “boom” they are sure will come if they defy their bosses and step on the brakes.

I do not deny these harsh realities for a minute. But I also believe that if we are honest with ourselves, many of us will realize that it isn’t really outside forces which enslave us. They are who we blame, but the worst pharaohs are the ones we see in the mirror. We are the ones who tell ourselves that resting is not justifiable because there are still items remaining on our to-do lists. We are the ones who can’t sit still if the house is a mess, the lawn needs mowing, or a text message or email has not yet been answered. We are the ones who have truly convinced ourselves that not just our jobs, but our value, and our children’s value as good human beings, is directly connected to how much we or they do and produce. If we didn’t believe this, I don’t think we would give the pharaohs of the world so much power.

So I think that instead of simply thinking of Sabbath-keeping as a divine have-to or a means of rejecting Pharaoh, it is helpful to consider why we need to rest and what we get from it. In the Bible, the answer to both of these questions is found in today’s passage from *Exodus*. Explaining why we should keep the Fourth Commandment, *Exodus* 31:17 says that the Sabbath, “Is a sign forever between me and the people of Israel that in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day God rested and was refreshed.” There are two ways to understand

this passage. The first way I explained a few years ago, but it bears repeating. Articulated most by Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann, that way says that God was worn out after creating the whole universe and needed to rest.<sup>2</sup> We don't often think of God being tired, and maybe God wasn't physically tired. But after six days of making everything, God was depleted in another way. The word "refreshed" in this verse reveals this. In the Hebrew, the word is actually *re-nepheshed*. *Nephesh* is one of the words Judaism uses for "soul." The other two are *ruach* and *neshamah*. It is said that your nephesh is your life essence, the instincts of your soul. *Ruach*, which means Spirit, captures the emotions of the soul, and *neshamah*, the intellect of the soul. When God rested on the seventh day, *Exodus* says that God was re-nepheshed, which means that God used the time to have God's instincts and life force revitalized. God was literally re-souled (soul, not sole) on the seventh day!

If our all-powerful, all knowing, omnipresent God needed to be re-souled after six days, then how much more do we, who are made in God's image but lack God's power, knowledge, and ability to be omnipresent, need to be re-souled ourselves in order to function! The reason God made resting so important is that God designed us to need re-souling regularly. Think of it like defragging your computer or changing the oil in your car if need be, but the point is that we were created in such a way that our systems, like God's, require rest in order to function at an optimal level. Our souls and instincts, not just our bodies and minds, need regular rebooting. Otherwise our instincts don't work right, and our souls fill with gunk. To deny this is to say that we can do something that God cannot. It is to say that we can be perpetual motions machines and never diminish our souls. Basically, it is to lie to ourselves and each other. We can fool ourselves and others with this lie for a while. But eventually the consequence of trying to live this way is major system failure from inadequate maintenance for both our bodies and our souls.

I love how this passage draws parallels between our nepheshes to God's nephesh, and our work to God's work of creation. But there is still another way of looking at it, a way I just learned about, which is equally compelling and worth thinking about. The great rabbinic scholar Abraham Heschel said that although *Genesis* says on the seventh day of creation God rested, that does not mean that God did nothing that day. *Genesis* 2:2 begins, "on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested." This implies that God finished up creating something that day, and then stopped to rest, and according to Heschel, that something was *menuha*.<sup>3</sup> *Menuha* is a Hebrew word which means resting in peace (not in the sense of being dead, but of being at peace in life). It is not just the rest that comes from the absence of work, however. *Menuha* is a positive term, not a negative, which conveys the idea of resting in tranquility, serenity, and peace. Thus Heschel argues, on the seventh day, God created in the midst of the glorious cacophony of creation, a moment of soul-filling stillness and peace, a dimension of quietness filled with grace. God created the kind of rest that comes from staring at the beauty of the universe until you believe that all will be well, and then God spent the rest of the day doing just that.

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<sup>2</sup> See Brueggemann, Walter, "You Cannot Fool Your Nephesh" in *Mandate to Difference: An Invitation to the Contemporary Church* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 141-58.

<sup>3</sup> Heschel, Abraham Joshua, *The Sabbath: its meaning for modern man* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1951), 22-23.

Menuha is what Job yearns for in his suffering—the absence of strife and fear and distrust. Menuha is what the psalmist celebrated when he wrote in the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, “He leads me beside the still waters; he restoreth my soul.” Until I read Heschel I always thought that passage meant unmoving waters, like a lake as calm as glass. That’s a beautiful image, but one which didn’t really make sense to me because when it comes to water metaphors in the Bible, “living water” is what is typically associated with God. But the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm affirms what *Genesis* also affirms, that there is a kind of life-giving water which is not bubbling and cascading like a spring, but is still profoundly refreshing. That water is the waters of *menuhot*, the waters which restore the soul. According to Jewish tradition, our nepheshes need not just the rest which comes from taking a break from work, but also the rest which comes from experiencing the stillness and tranquility God created on the seventh day. God’s last act in the original creation was to make serenity and quiet for us to enjoy as much as we enjoy the rest of creation.<sup>4</sup>

Knowing this you can see why Jesus got a little irritated with the Pharisees in today’s gospel lesson. They had Sabbath-keeping all wrong. They got the fact that it was important to God, so much so that they had created 1, 521 rules of their own to enforce Sabbath-keeping. “You can’t light a fire, because that’s work,” they insisted. “You can’t pluck grain because that’s work.” “Seriously?” Jesus said in today’s lesson from *Mark*. “We aren’t bringing in a harvest here. We were just having a snack. You know that the Sabbath was made for humanity, not the other way around right? Why are you micro-legislating God’s gift? Sabbath-keeping isn’t supposed to be a burden. It’s supposed to be a gift.”

In 2014, a scientist named David Reinhard did a series of eleven studies involving people ages 18 to 77, to assess how people today respond to times of stillness and rest.<sup>5</sup> He asked his subjects to sit in a room without technology or anything to do for fifteen minutes. He invited them to use the time to meditate, reflect, or nap. But he also gave them an out. Participants could shorten their time if they gave themselves electrical shocks. The results of his study are not exactly surprising, but they are disturbing. Sixty-seven percent of men and twenty-five percent of women tested preferred shocking themselves to sitting still in quiet for fifteen minutes. Fifteen minutes of stillness and rest was too much for them! Do you see what we’ve come to now in our worship of productivity and stimulation? We have lost the ability to find rest and peace, not because we are micro-legislating Sabbath time now, but because we have devalued the need for it for so long that we no longer know how to embrace the blessings of rest. Even though avoiding rest brings us pain, we are choosing pain for ourselves, and ultimately for others because we are not living as we were made to be, instead of choosing refreshment, tranquility, and soul-feeding peace. That’s not a sign to God or anyone else of our dedication; that’s a sign that we are being ridiculous and have clearly lost our way.

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Study cited in Elias, Nina, “Up to 67% of People Would Rather Receive an Electric Shock Than Meditate”, *Prevention*, July 3, 2014, retrieved Sept. 1, 2017  
from <https://www.prevention.com/mind-body/emotional-health/many-people-find-meditation-more-unpleasant-enjoyable>

One of the reasons I have a hard time with Sabbath-keeping is that I really like working. It's not just a have-to for me, it's also a want-to. Maybe it's that way for you, or maybe Pharaoh's got such a strong hold on you that you just cannot see the liberating alternative God offers. But what we all need to recognize is that God never intended to punish or burden us when God designed us in such a way that we need regular rest to be whole. God wanted to bless us; God still does. So join me in trying to take Sabbath-keeping more seriously. We do not need to live as slaves when we have God's grace to sustain us. And when we stop to rest, we rediscover both who we really work for, and the special serenity God made to ensure that we would always be able to find rest for our souls. Thanks be to God! Amen.