

## **“The Creative Power of Rest”**

By Rev. Elizabeth D. McLean, Prince of Peace Presbyterian Church

5-16-21

Based upon Exodus 20:8-11; Mark 6:30-32

“I don’t know how we’re going to recover,” a friend of mine, whom I will call “Susan,” said recently, speaking about the emotional and physical drain the pandemic had caused in her life, and the lives of her other friends who were parents of young children. Like so many parents during the pandemic, she found herself having to switch gears from being a working mom of a child in school, to a home-bound mom who had to drop most of her outside responsibilities in order to help her child with virtual school. The situation didn’t really work for either of them. When Susan wasn’t relearning 4<sup>th</sup> grade herself so she could help teach it to her daughter, and wasn’t trying to calm her meltdowns or cajole her to work and meet her deadlines without adding to her stress, Susan was trying to get her own work done around the edges, while also juggling being homebound with her husband, managing the household tasks, and addressing the multiple anxieties 2020 provoked in all three of them. She got through the year by the skin of her teeth, but not without pickling herself in cortisol, the fight or flight hormone that stress inspires, in the process. So, when her daughter went back to in-person school, setting her free to go back to work herself, and pick up those responsibilities she had had to drop, instead of feeling thrilled and relieved and energized by the return of something kind of like normal life, she just found herself even more exhausted. After more than a year of running on fumes, she had no reserves to power her through the adjustments of reentry. “How am I ever going to recover?” she mused out loud. “When am I going to have the time to recover?”

She isn’t the only one asking this question. Although there are some people who spent last year bored out of their minds, either because they were trapped at home and could not work, or because they were trapped in retirement and could not do the activities that normally entertained them, a large segment of society spent last year working harder than they ever had before. Many had to learn to do their jobs in entirely new ways, or to cobble together multiple new part-time jobs, while also helping their children learn new ways of doing schooling from home, entertaining them 24/7 because friends couldn’t come over, and much more. Others had to work high-stress “essential” jobs without a break, and then come home and pretend to their kids who were scared and desperately missed them, that they had no cares in the world. In the midst of it all, many were unable to achieve that uninterrupted state of work “flow” that energizes the mind, or to maintain the patterns of life that had refreshed their bodies. What month was it? What day? One of my colleagues counted all of last year as March. “It’s the 130<sup>th</sup> day of March,” she would post online. There was no longer a work week and a weekend, just relentless, continuous challenge. As a result, many people are now beginning “reentry” without having felt rested or refreshed in more than a year. Many people are struggling as they try to resume doing what they used to do, in part because their nepheshes have been starved for far too long.

“Their what?!” you may be thinking. In Hebrew, the word for the human self, soul, or essence is *nephesh*. Your nephesh includes your mind and body; it’s not a separate cloudlike soul distinct from the rest of you as the Greeks envisioned. But it is also more than mind and body. This is significant because as the great Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann once wrote,

while you may be able to trick your body into pushing through its fatigue, and keep your mind running on adrenaline long after it's tired, "you cannot fool your nephesh."<sup>1</sup> When your soul, the very essence of who you are is exhausted, caffeine and cat naps aren't enough to fix it. According to the Bible, the only thing that can do that is Sabbath time.

I've preached on Sabbath-keeping before, but it's been a while, so it bears repeating. Sabbath-keeping in the Bible is not about worshiping on either a Saturday or a Sunday, although worshiping God any day is a very good thing to do. When faithful Jews mark the beginning of each weekly Shabbat, or Sabbath, by lighting two candles, the candles explain what the Sabbath is really for: one candle celebrates the rest that we have been given by God in the Sabbath, and the other candle, the freedom. Sabbath rest, as we heard from *Exodus* today, is based upon the Creation story. God created the whole world in six days according to *Genesis* 1. Then on the 7<sup>th</sup> day, God rested. "The Sabbath is a sign," God says in *Exodus* 31, between God and God's people designed to remind them of this important truth. On the 7<sup>th</sup> day, even God "rested and was refreshed," or as the Hebrew actually says, "rested and was *nepheshed*." (Ex. 31:17). Since God needed to be "re-souled" on the 7<sup>th</sup> day, and since we were made in the image of God, we too need regular rest in order to be "nepheshed," and to live as the people God made us to be.

The second candle of Sabbath freedom comes from the second version of the Commandments that appears in *Deuteronomy*. In that version of the 4<sup>th</sup> Commandment, the rationale given for the Sabbath is not the Creation story, but the Exodus story. Since God went to the trouble to liberate the Hebrew people from slavery under Pharaoh, God wanted them to recognize that they no longer had to produce 24/7 in order to justify their existence. In God's economy, everyone—men and women, slave and free, foreign and familiar, even the animals—all get a day of rest each week. Every time they kept the Sabbath, the Hebrew people would remember that they no longer had to serve Pharaoh, and the world would see that the God of Israel was a God who not only allowed people to have rest and refreshment but required that they do. (Deut. 5:12-15). Thus, the sign that was once between God and the Israelites, becomes a sign for the world of a better, healthier way to live grounded in God's grace.

Last week I talked about putting our trust in God and free falling into God's grace. The Sabbath requirement in the Mosaic covenant was in many ways the ultimate trust fall. Not only did it require the Israelites to take a day off working each week, something the surrounding nations did not do, but the Law also required giving the land itself a Sabbath year off every seven years (Lev. 25:4), and effectively two years off from planting and harvesting every 50 years. (Lev. 25:8-22). Israel's economy was largely agrarian. It's not hard to imagine how panicked these commands must have made the Israelites feel. What would they eat? How would they clothe themselves? But God was not moved by their concerns to change the rules. "I will provide what you need," God said, and then, in case that loving assurance wasn't motivating enough for them, in *Exodus* Chapter 31 verse 15, God also told them that violating the 4<sup>th</sup> Commandment was a capital offense. That is how serious God was about Israel's requirement to stop and rest. God wanted their identity to be grounded in God's healthy way of living, not in the world's oppressive ones.

---

<sup>1</sup> Brueggemann, Walter, *Mandate to Difference: An Invitation to the Contemporary Church* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 141-58.

For generations, Israel was extremely strict about Sabbath-keeping. By Jesus' day, there were 1,521 actions expressly forbidden on the Sabbath for all the people who weren't sure what counted as "work" and what didn't.<sup>2</sup> The Israelites kept the Sabbath even though they were mocked mercilessly by the Greeks and the Romans who thought their practices were ridiculously impractical. Seneca described the Israelites as, "This most outrageous people [who] lose almost a seventh part of their life in inactivity."<sup>3</sup> But over time, instead of the Jews persuading the rest of the world about the wisdom of their way, God's way, the Greek and Roman perspective won out. Sabbath time came to be seen as "unproductive," "slothful," or "lost or wasted" time instead of essential for body, mind, and soul, and time to reconnect with God. As a result, although Orthodox Jews are still strict with their Sabbaths, most everyone else, Jewish and Christian, now looks upon the 4<sup>th</sup> Commandment as a suggestion they can ignore more than a life-or-death commandment that must be followed, especially when deadlines loom, kids have needs, and the bills won't pay themselves. Rest now for many is a luxury they feel they cannot afford.

This may feel necessary and understandable to us, but it doesn't change the fact that theologically speaking, our behavior is unfaithful, and reveals serious trust issues fueled by idolatry and pride. We don't trust that God will equip us to do what truly needs doing without losing our jobs or being bad parents. We believe our society's perspective that our value is grounded in our productivity more than God's, and we believe that what we do is too critical to be handled by someone else or be skipped altogether. Basically, our behavior says, "We understand more clearly than God that we are essential, work is essential, and rest is not." I am as guilty as everyone else is in this regard, which is something I'm not proud of, since I am supposed to be modeling discipleship for all of you. Early in my ministry, before my son came along, I was pretty good at keeping a work-free day each week. Once I became a single mom and solo pastor, that practice kind of fell by the wayside. There was just too much to do, it seemed. But ministry also lends itself to this problem if you love God and your flock as passionately as I do and don't know how to rest. Even Barbara Brown Taylor, who has written about how diligently she keeps a Sabbath now admitted that she was no different when she was a minister, and she doesn't have kids!<sup>4</sup> That makes me feel a bit better. When one is deeply invested in work and family, it's hard not to feel as though taking time off is a capital offense, not Sabbath-keeping.

Now that we are in the period of "reentry," however, we all have the option of resetting our work weeks intentionally. We have the option of going forward in a new way, taking with us what we have learned during the pandemic, rather than simply going back old patterns. One of those lessons is about rest. So now is the perfect time to restore God's rhythm of a 6-day work week in order to make healthy nepheshes a priority. We need this to recover. Not everyone may be able to take a whole day off, particularly those in financial crisis working multiple jobs. But at the very least, we all can go back with a new-found wisdom that non-productive time is just as essential as productive time. We all can go back with the intention of trying to set aside some

---

<sup>2</sup> Kalas, J. Ellsworth, *The Ten Commandments from the Back Side* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), 47.

<sup>3</sup> As quoted in Michael, J. Hugh, "*The Jewish Sabbath in the Latin Classical Writers*," *THE AMERICAN JOURNAL OF SEMITIC LANGUAGES AND LITERATURES*, Vol. 40, No. 2, (Jan. 1924), 121.

<sup>4</sup> Taylor, Barbara Brown, *An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith* (New York: HarperCollins Pub., 2009), 121-140.

time to feed our souls. It doesn't really matter what day you pick, but pick a day where your only job is to rest and allow God's grace to restore your nephesh. On that day, forget the laundry, order take out, sit down, and be still for a while without checking emails and to-do lists 20 times. Taylor swears that when you commit to doing this, the Spirit will help you get everything done that needs to be done in the remaining six days. Others I know who do this say that it feels like God stretches time for you; perhaps God does. But it is also easier to be more efficient when your nephesh isn't starved.

I am going to try to do this myself, but before I do, this summer, I am taking Sabbath-keeping still one step further. In the same way that God's law called for longer Sabbath breaks every seven years, our denomination recommends longer 3-month long Sabbath breaks called Sabbatical for pastors who have been serving for at least seven years, to recognize the particular drain that 24/7 ministry can have on mind, body, and spirit, and ensure that pastors can maintain a strong enough connection with God both to feed their nepheshes and to maintain the kind of creativity and patience necessary to fulfill their calling.<sup>5</sup> As the Office of the General Assembly explains it, "Sabbatical Leave... is qualitatively different from 'vacation' or 'days off.' It is an opportunity for the individual to strategically disengage from regular and normal tasks" so as to reconnect with self and God on a deeper level.<sup>6</sup> The modern parable of the teacup helps to explain why disengagement is so important to the process: A student came to a wise master and asked that he would be taught everything he needed to know to be wise. The master said, "Sit first, and have some tea." The student sat and watched as the master began to pour tea into his cup. As he poured, the cup began to fill, but he kept on pouring. Soon the tea was overflowing the cup. "What are you doing?!" the student asked. "Can't you see that cup is full?" "Yes, it is," said the master. "And so are you, too full for anything to be added. Come back when there is room in your cup for more."<sup>7</sup>

In order for pastors to hear God's Word, they have to empty their teacup periodically of the things that have already made it overflow. As long as we are worrying about our flocks 24/7, and about sermons, budgets, buildings, classes, committees, mission projects, pandemic protocols, and more, we don't really have the capacity to receive still more creative ideas from the spirit. As long as our nepheshes are being starved, we don't have the energy either. I have been in ministry for almost 21 years without a Sabbatical. Even before the pandemic my teacup was full. So, this summer, beginning next Sunday after worship, I am going to be stepping away from pastoring for 3 months in order to listen to the Spirit, and replenish my nephesh. It won't be a vacation, although I plan to do fun things like travel to visit family and friends, spend time in my garden and doing things I enjoy. It will be a time of "intensive enhancement for ministry and mission," as the Office of the General Assembly puts it. When I come back in September, I will be eager to see you all, energized with new ideas as well as physical energy with the help of the Spirit, and equipped to lead us into the next chapter of Prince of Peace's service as the Body of Christ in the world. While I am gone, you will have a more than capable preacher and pastor in

---

<sup>5</sup> Dunnigan, Erin, "*The Necessity of Holy Breaks: Sabbaticals are a must for healthy pastors and healthy congregations.*," PRESBYTERIANS TODAY, Mar. 20, 2020; <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/story/pt-0320-sabbaticals>

<sup>6</sup> "*Rational for Sabbatical Leave*," Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Office of the General Assembly at <https://oga.pcusa.org/section/mid-council-ministries/ministers/rationale-sabbatical-leave>

<sup>7</sup> There are many versions of this parable. See Pannunzio, Lu Anne, "*The Cup of Life*" Blog, Oct. 21, 2015; retrieved from <https://theteacupoflife.com/2015/06/the-tale-of-overflowing-teacup.html>

the Reverend Dottie LaPenta, our Parish Associate, whom you already know, and who loves you all as much as I do.

“Do justice to your own soul,” John Wesley once said. “Give it time and means to grow. Do not starve yourself any longer.”<sup>8</sup> I hope as you contemplate your own reentry in the world, you won’t forget to light two candles in your mind and heart to remind you about the importance of Sabbath rest and freedom in your life. You cannot fool your soul, so make the time for it to be filled. If we do this, I am confident that the God who also needed rest and re-souling will lead us into exciting new chapters in our individual lives, and in our collective ministry together. Pray for me this summer as I will be praying for you. Resting isn’t going to be easy for me, nor being disconnected from you. But I am deeply grateful for the privilege you have given me to have this time to learn and grow. May the Spirit bless us in this summer of reconnecting with God and others, for the good of all our souls, and the benefit of our future ministry together. Amen.

---

<sup>8</sup> As quoted at [https://www.azquotes.com/author/15507-John\\_Wesley/tag/soul](https://www.azquotes.com/author/15507-John_Wesley/tag/soul)