

SABBATH REST

A Jubilee Reflection

When I began to develop our year's Jubilee theme, I started with the concept of Sabbath that is at the heart of the Year of Jubilee in Leviticus 25. From verse 8, "Count off seven Sabbaths of years – seven times seven years – so that the seven sabbaths of years amount to a period of forty-nine years." And then the people were told not to sow their crops and not to reap that fiftieth year. They were to eat only what grew naturally in their fields.

Now, that's a bit of a test of faith. But it was more than that – because letting the land rest was part of the Mosaic law every seventh year: "Let the land lie fallow." So that meant no sowing and reaping in the forty-ninth and the fiftieth year! And so God comes to us and asks us to quit making money for the next two years, well, maybe not out of the blue. God tells us to quit making money in our forty-ninth and fiftieth years. God gives us a little warning! But God tells us for those two years in the middle of our lives to just devote ourselves to doing good, to taking care of people, to studying, to worship, to contemplation, to church, to matters of the heart, matters of the spirit.

God says: Just trust me. I'll see you through. As God said to ancient Israel in Leviticus 25:21, "I will send you such a blessing in the year before that the land will yield enough for three years." Imagine that happening! Could you handle that? Think about it! Maybe one reason life gets hard for us is because we don't do this.

Anyway, in the biblical account, the concept of Sabbath was encoded into the lovely, poetic account of creation, Genesis 2:1-3:

"Thus the heavens and the earth were completed
in all their vast array.
By the seventh day God had finished the work
he had been doing;
so on the seventh day he rested
from all his work.
And God blessed the seven day
and made it holy,
because he rested from all the work of creating
that he had done."

And so it's no surprise that when Moses is given the Ten Great Words on Mount Sinai, the Fourth Word is this.

Exodus 20:8-11 –

Remember the Sabbath day
by keeping it holy.
Six days you shall labor
and do all your work,

but the seventh day is a Sabbath
to the Lord your God.
On it
you shall not do any work,
neither you,
nor your son or daughter,
nor your manservant or maidservant,
nor your animals,
nor the alien within your gates.
For in six days the Lord made
the heavens and the earth,
the sea, and all that is in them,
but he rested on the seventh day.
Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day
and made it holy.
Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy.

Or more simply, On the Sabbath day you shall not do any work.

So at the heart of Hebrew life is this notion of Sabbath, taking the seventh day of each week as a day of rest, a day to abstain from work. The name “Sabbath” comes from the Hebrew verb *sabat* – “to rest” – as in “he [God] rested” on the seventh day of creation. It goes back to the very beginning of being human and it would be expanded in Israelite society into a Sabbatical year (in Exodus 23:10-11 and elsewhere) when the land was to be left the entire year unplowed and unharvested and left for the poor to eat from.

Very early Christians transferred this notion of Sabbath to the first day of the week in celebration of the resurrection of Jesus. But I have no interest in any debate over Sunday or Saturday. On the basis of several New Testament texts (Romans 14:5; Colossians 2:16) it’s not a debate worth having, and only distracts us from the larger matter – devoting regular time to rest, to not working, to depending on God, to keeping one day a week holy, sacred, sanctified.

When I was growing up our family kept the Sabbath in the traditional Christian sense, and I had mixed feeling about it, and still do. Going to church was O.K. – both times on Sunday. It’s just what you did, and the people you liked best in all the world were there. But Sunday afternoons were hard to take, essentially because you couldn’t do anything. You couldn’t play sports. You couldn’t throw, catch or kick a ball. You could take a walk but not a run. You stayed dressed up in your Sunday best all day. And when we got a TV, and we were the last house on the block to get one, you couldn’t watch it on Sunday afternoons. I don’t know where the rules came from. They just were. At the time I supposed they were chiseled in small print on Moses’ two stone tablets.

Later in life I came to see Sabbath in a new, more glorious, more heroic light in the 1981 movie *Chariots of Fire*. This film tells the real-life story of the Scottish sprinter Eric Liddell who gave up the chance for Olympic glory in the 100 meters in the 1924 games

in Paris because one of his qualifying heats was on a Sunday. And it was in this movie that I began to sense the reverence, the serious purpose, the potentiality of Sabbath. Liddell would go on to serve as a missionary in China and ended up in a Japanese Internment Camp exhausted by his concern for the other prisoners, malnourished and finally dying from a brain tumor.

So I have come to see over the course of my life, and as I have dug deeply into spiritual traditions from around the world, the importance of Sabbath, of sanctifying time, setting it aside from work. And I would note that work was the issue, not worship. This Fourth Word specifies no rituals of worship – simply that the day should be a Sabbath to the Lord your God. And it had another purpose, a humanitarian purpose, the protection of servants and animals in the household, a way to see that servants, and perhaps aliens, were not exploited and that animals were not overused (see Deuteronomy 5:12-15). And so this Fourth Word tells us that at the heart of a free society where our spirits flourish, where our inner lives flourish, there is this concept of Sabbath, of rest, of designated times when we do not work. And I have come to see that this is beautiful, and I have come to wonder whether so much of the world-weariness of so many of us is because we have lost this concept.

No one captures the beauty of the Sabbath better than the great Jewish scholar Abraham Joshua Heschel's in his book *The Sabbath*. I wasn't expecting much when I picked up this book (a residue of childhood memories, I suppose), but in the end it's a dazzling vision of Sabbath, of what can happen when we re-enchant time. Heschel pictures the Sabbath as a palace in time completely detached from the world of space, unrelated even to the moon, a carefully structured retreat from the hustle and bustle of the marketplace, a day we recreate Eden and anticipate paradise, reliving God's intentions for us thereby converting time into eternity and filling time with spirit (p. 41). One day a week we set apart for freedom. One day a week we set apart to be free, to detach from all the worries, preoccupations, obligations and responsibilities of the other six days. Six days I may worry, but not on the seventh. This day I live without money or the thought of money. This day I let go and rest from all my struggles. This day my goal is not to have, but to be; not to own, but to give; not to control, but to enjoy; not to learn more information, but to stop and look and see, to experience the sacred. This day I mend my tattered life. I rethink my possessions and realize that I am able to live without them. This day I learn to live with people and yet be free. I learn to live with things and remain independent. This day I realize that it is in God I trust. This day I experience the sacredness of now, of right now, of the grace that already always surrounds me. This day I remember again that one good hour might be worth a lifetime; that an instant of returning to God may restore what has been lost in years of escaping from God.

The vision, the potentiality, then is this: This primal Fourth Word calls us to devote one day in seven to finding and renewing our inner lives, and thereby to learning the art of Sabbath, so that Sabbath moments are always there for us, any day. Whatever the stress or madness we face, we carry this truth of Sabbath in our souls, and we can always under any circumstances still and quiet our souls and find our rest in God. And in this way we find our way to Jubilee, to jubilation, to joy, to homecoming, to returning home to God.

