

*Genesis 2: 2-3*

*Mark 1: 32-39*

Truth be known folks I am laughing at myself here because it is all too easy for me to fall into the “Martha” role of “drive-ness”—do, do, do and even secretly feel a smug sense of superiority for my productivity and even worse a bit of judgmentalism on the other’s “laziness” (*Smell like bad theology? Works righteousness? Self-reliance—Where is grace? Where is Sabbath? Where is balance?*).

We might know in our heads that God doesn’t simply *suggest* we rest, but literally *commands* it. The Sabbath was given to save us from the oppression of incessant work. Rest is a good thing. We need it. We crave it. Why then is it so hard to practice? Why do we feel guilty when we slow down? Why do we feel we are “wasting” time, doing “nothing” when we simply be? Perhaps we are living in our own ego created rhythm and not in the rhythm of grace? Listen to how Guinella Norris’ expresses this struggle in her meditation called *Planning the Day*:

*The lists grow—sometimes on lengthy strips of paper.  
How easily my life becomes a list—  
A long scroll of duties.*

*Sometimes the lists break down into  
separate memos—  
A batch of yellow memory scraps each  
with an injunction.  
Do this! Do that!*

*I can’t get rid of my lists.*

*Perhaps there is some primitive magic here,  
That if I name my duties I must perform them.  
But then I almost always rebel.  
These lists when they aren’t burdening me,  
Give me an oppositional determination to disobey and do whatever I please.*

*Why do I put this “have-to-do-it” burden on myself?  
It only makes me righteous, artificially safe, and soul-tired.*

*Help me to sit here quietly.  
Help me not so much to plan as to listen.  
Help me to be informed, as in “shaped from within”, by Your will.  
My burden is so heavy. Yours is always light.*

This reflection is so insightful. It captures the tyranny of work we “human-do-ings” all labor under. It comforts me to know I’m not alone in this struggle to dethrone the idol of work. Our good ol’ Protestant work ethic (especially in an over achieving town like Ann Arbor) has gone awry when we are seduced into thinking our self-worth and our productivity and paycheck are one and the same.

Sabbath reminds us that God has called us by name and blessed us with inestimable worth and there’s nothing we can do to EARN it—even if we nobly cross everything off our “to do” lists. Sabbath is the spiritual antidote for the overworked.

For generations “Sabbath” meant Sunday or Saturday to most people—a day when stores, restaurants, sports facilities closed, houses of worship opened and families came together to rest and renew their relationship with God. Although this reality of Sabbath as a day of rest has sadly been lost in our secularized, workaholic society, the sense of Sabbath, as spiritual leisure, is needed now more than ever. We are living in a time-starved, soul hungry, anxiety fraught world, reeling from one crisis to the next from a pandemic, to systemic racism, to chronic natural disasters brought on by climate change, to humanitarian crisis at our border and violence and divisiveness within our borders. This calamitous cacophony will drive us crazy if we don’t punctuate our lives with stillness and silence so we can hear the whispers of God’s wisdom and truth that cut through the false narratives.

As important as it is to stay informed, the news can breed an addiction to contempt for the “other”. I say this as a self-confessing public radio and NYT junkie.

I used to religiously start my day with the news. I am on sabbatical now and have inverted the ordering of my days. My husband and I now start the day with the good news, mediation and prayer, which gives us a grounding to handle the distressing news. Sabbath enables the good news to form us from within so that our activism is shaped by compassion, love, hope, humility.

I’d like us to think about “Sabbath as a way to take back our time and take care of our souls—one moment at a time. Sabbath is any moment that actively includes the presence of God’s Spirit. (p.15, *Sabbath Sense* by Donna Schaper)

Jesus is our model. He wove a Sabbath sensibility into the very heart of his active and demanding ministry. In our gospel story this morning we catch a glimpse of Jesus’ Sabbath practice. In the very thick of his ministry when his “day planner” was overflowing (“*and the whole town was gathered outside his door*”—clamoring for

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his touch and healing word – *“In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed.”* This Sabbath retreat in the midst of it all must have been the secret to his ministry—the very thing that sustained him and enabled him to continue to pour out his life for the least and the lost and not get seduced by those in power.

Sabbath is anything but laziness or wasted time. It’s the very thing that enables us to work with passion and purpose, energy, imagination and love.

It has been chiropractics on my soul to return to morning meditation. The natural world further restores my soul and perspective. Every time I walk the trails through the exquisite beauty of the prairies where I live, I marvel at the wondrous vastness of the universe – that underfoot there are miles and miles of mycelium created by fungi and used by trees to communicate with each other and overhead there are a plethora of galaxies. God’s spectacular creation provides me with a larger container to pour out my grief, indignation, bewilderment, sacred questions, fervent prayers, longings, deep gratitude and joy. This is Sabbath time for me. As I walk I talk to God.

My dear son Max noticed my sacred ritual and affirmed *“Big Aims, did you just ‘commune with the cosmos’ again?”* I love this! Communing with the cosmos helps me remember that God is at the center of my life and not my myriad of “to do” lists. I remember that I don’t have to solve it all. I can’t. The complexity of life’s many problems are far beyond my pay grade.

I merely have to trust, allow myself to be led by the Spirit, and then do my part as a part of a larger faith community. I begin to breathe deeply again. My white knuckled grip begins to relax. I let go. I regain perspective and I rest in God’s Grace. I am truly amazed at the positive residual effects of these simple practices woven into my days. They have created for me an equanimity and a spiritual lens through which I can hold in tension the paradoxical nature of truth.

On Sept 1st I embarked on a 3-month sabbatical which has included studying sacred earth and soul, Julian of Norwich, who I will share with you during the Adult Ed class today, personal retreats, spiritual formation, contemplation and prayer. I did not go far away like my Celtic spirituality pilgrimage in Iona, Scotland on my last sabbatical. But, perhaps I am endeavoring to launch into the longest journey of all—from my head to my heart, from my words to silence, from my fears to faith, from chronic over-busyness to stillness and mindfulness.

My Sabbath practice is teaching me how to hold grief in one hand and gratitude in the other, how to be a prophetic disrupter without having my inner peace disrupted, how to have my fire for justice kindled not with

anger but with love, how to discern what boxes I have outgrown and then dream so big that it makes small minds uncomfortable, how to both embrace the courage of my convictions while listening with empathy to those I have disagreed with. This is hard work and it requires a grounded center.

The gift of such a sabbatical is highly unusual. But we can ALL claim a Sabbath sensibility for our lives. We don't need to go far away for long stretches of time and have some guru inspire us.

I challenge you all, in the midst of the academic rigors and personal and professional responsibilities and demands, to claim some "be still and know that God is God time". The word disciple comes from the word discipline. All it takes is discipline—making this a priority and a daily practice. How are you, on a regular basis, "keeping the Sabbath holy"?

Sabbath in the deepest sense is a state of consciousness or mindfulness all the time everywhere.

Yet because spiritual vigilance is so difficult and there are few genuine mystics among us, we can at least try to honor a rhythm of action and reflection, productivity and prayer, and in so doing live the rhythm of Grace.

The Biblical context for understanding Sabbath is the Genesis week. Sabbath is the seventh and final day in which "God rested (shabath) from all the work that God had done" (Gen 2:2). We re-enter that sequence of days in which God spoke energy and matter into existence, and repeatedly come upon the refrain, "And there was evening and there was morning, one day...and there was evening and there was morning, a second day...and there was evening and there was morning"—on and on, six times.

This is the Hebrew way of understanding day; it is not ours. American days, most of them anyway, begin with the alarm clock blaring into the predawn darkness and end, not with sunset, but several hours past that, when we turn off the electric lights. But for God—day begins with night! Evening is the beginning of God's creative work. It is the onset of God speaking light, stars, earth, vegetation, fungi, animals, man, woman into being.

But it is also the time when we quit our activity and go to sleep. When it is evening "*I lay me down to sleep and pray the Lord my soul to keep*" and drift off into unconsciousness, a state in which we are absolutely nonproductive and have no cash value.

Then we wake up, rested, jump out of bed full of energy, grab a cup of coffee, and rush out the door or zoom to zoom to get things started. The first thing we discover (a great blow to the ego) is that everything was started hours ago. All the important things got underway while we were fast asleep!

When we dash into the school day or workday, we walk into an operation that is half over already. We enter into work in which the basic plan is already established, the assignments given, the operations in motion.

The Hebrew evening/morning sequence conditions us, if we let it, into the rhythms of grace. We go to sleep, and God begins to work. As we sleep God develops God's covenant. We wake and are called out to participate

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in God's creative action. We respond in faith, in work. But always grace is previous. Grace is primary. We wake into a world we didn't make; into a salvation we didn't earn. Evening: God begins, without our help, God's creative day. Morning: God calls us to enjoy and share and develop the work God initiated. Creation and covenant are sheer grace and there to greet us fresh as the morning and sure as the sunrise.

Sleep is God's contrivance for giving us the help God cannot get into us when we are awake.

As we allow this genesis rhythm to work on us we can discover something else: When we quit our days' work, nothing essential stops. We prepare for sleep not with a feeling of exhausted frustration because there is so much yet unfinished, but with expectancy. The day is about to begin! God's words are about to be spoken again and perhaps we'll even hear them in our dreams. During the hours of our sleep, how will God prepare to use our faithfulness, service and speech when morning breaks?

We go to sleep to get our egos and our agendas out of the way for a while. We get into the rhythm of grace. When we sleep, great and marvelous things, far beyond our capacities to invent or engineer, are in process—the moon marking the seasons, the lion roaring for its prey, the earthworms aerating the earth, the mycelium sequestering carbon, the stars turning in their courses, the proteins repairing our muscles, our dreaming brains restoring a deeper sanity beneath our fretting and fussing. Our work settles into the context of God's work. Human effort is honored and respected not as a thing in itself but by its integration into the rhythms of grace and blessing.

God's beloved, as we weave a Sabbath sensibility into the fabric of our days and allow our sleep to be a genuine resting in God's grace, we are responding to God's invitation:

*“Come and find the quiet center in the crowded life we lead, find the room for hope to enter, find the frame where we are free. Clear the chaos and the clutter, clear our eyes that we can see all the things that really matter, be at peace and simply be.” Amen.*

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