

Sabbath in a Time of COVID

Seeking After God Series

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Genesis 1:31 – 2:3, Mark 1:28-39

Introduction

Today we will be looking at the notion of finding healing and rest as part of our call with God, with special attention to our time of COVID.

COVID-19

Our current pandemic is changing how we view time.

I asked in our Facebook group what sabbath looks like right now, and here are some of the comments I got:

- Bill Brouwer commented that there are no social pressures and more time for reading
- Pam Winters says that she has time for quiet and reflection
- Bill Akins echoes this but notes that the choir in his house is terrible.
- Sandy Brown offers that she has time for thanksgiving for the blessings in her life.
- Heather Carter says that while she has some rest, “I just have different responsibilities and new ways to do some of them.” Amen to that! She and Richard have been watching morning prayer with Canterbury Cathedral on YouTube.

In these comments (from folks who are not working at full-time jobs), one sees some of the ups – more time to reflect, a chance to rework the daily life. Our daily habits are varying widely in this time, with some of us way busier – working parents with children doing online school, while for others the rhythm of our weeks have changed (no Sunday morning worship and social time at church), and some of us find ourselves too isolated.

All living creatures need rest.

In thinking about biblical sabbath, fundamental to the idea is *rest*.

What is modeled in the first Genesis creation story, is metaphorically true – God rests (ceases creative work) on the seventh day, and it is only as God is ceasing and resting that the heavens and the earth are truly completed.

In addition to being *metaphorically* true, the sabbath modeled in Genesis is also *literally* true. Biologists tell us that every living thing has a rest cycle. Our circadian rhythms are a part of our very design, and when we are pushed beyond the limits of the cycle, we return to this “24hourness” because it is our home base. This is true not just of humans, but also mice and even algae. The cycles of the earth are our basic rhythm of life – the light and the dark, the seasons, all of these give us a way to find life in the world.

Scientists tell us that dormancy is a potent force in nature. Seeds must remain dormant to gather up and mature for the time when they will spring forth into life. In one stage of dormancy – which is called “rest” – is controlled within the seed and is an inner clock. Rest only ends when the conditions will be favorable – there is no rushing this.

What is Sabbath in a time of COVID?

At the heart of the Sabbath is ceasing. Stopping. Doing nothing productive. Pretty radical, isn't it? Some of us feel that has been what's happening for most of the past year, I think.

But Sabbath also means connecting with our bodies and senses – to step out of the mental place of *doing* is replaced by the sense of *being*. Sabbath is about another way of living, a way that invites us into another framework for living, a way that allows us to taste and see the kingdom of God here on earth. Perhaps one of our invitations in this time of COVID is to lean to Sabbath as a way of inviting our bodies to experience more of our senses.

Sabbath these days might involve making a special food recipe (maybe you've been doing sourdough like so many?), or going on a walk to feel the sun, wind, snow, and see the amazing wildlife in our area. Taking up a new hobby might help you engage with physically making something useful or beautiful. The simple act of lighting a candle (or two or three) and gazing on it for a quiet moment brings sabbath. For a busy parent, it might be stepping outside of the house for a few minutes to catch one's breath.

Stopping for Sabbath is an act of faith and trust that the world will go on without us. Sabbath time allows us to remember that we can trust in the Divine creator and others to help take care of the world.

Sabbath as resurrection/new life

Some of us may have grown up in a culture where Sabbath consisted mostly of “don'ts.” Don't dance, don't go to the movies, don't play cards. This cycle of making the sabbath something to be endured is not new.

When Jesus encountered the Sabbath a thousand years after it had been instituted, he found a legalistic structure that was adding to stress, rather than relieving it. Jesus approved of the Sabbath, but he wasn't beyond tweaking those who sought to codify it into something that was able to be a healing time, not just something that created a burden for the poor and the sick.

The text in Mark shows how Jesus operated in a way that was more flexible than simply taking an entire day from work – that finding times and ways to get away from busyness could be more flexible than that.

As Christianity developed after Jesus' resurrection, Sabbath time began to take on new understandings as well. If Jesus came to save the world, then the Lord's Day was a time to recognize the work of Christ in the world, and for the followers to exhibit the kinds of healing arts that Jesus embodied – prayer, singing, spiritual teaching, healing, community building of a very different sort than that found at the temple in Jerusalem. Sabbath practices that gave life attracted people to him and his way.

That's another invitation in this time to COVID – to connect to others in the safe ways possible during this time. Maybe it is writing a card or letter to someone we think of but haven't contacted, or calling someone we haven't talked to in a while, or like the Carters, finding a spiritually nourishing online offering.

Summary

1. Do carve out some quiet “do nothing” time – because we do need it, but do it how it works best for you.
2. Also find ways that your sabbath time is generative – whether connecting with your family “pod” or doing something creative.

I've put together a handout on Sabbath to get you started if you need some ideas. It's on our website on the worship page for this Sunday and included in the Sunday Worship Links email that went out yesterday.

Let me know how it goes, and how your life changes in deepening your Sabbath practice.

Amen.

Practices for a Simple Sabbath

Light a candle.

Set aside sacred time for a family meal, for prayer or meditation or simply quiet reading. Set a candle before you, offer a simple blessing and let the world fall away.

Practice thanksgiving.

Give thanks before meals, upon rising, when going to sleep. During Sabbath, we are less concerned with what is missing and more grateful for what has already been given.

Bless your children.

Place your hand gently on their heads and offer your blessing. What do you most wish for them? Self-knowledge, courage, safety, joy? Let them hear your prayers for their happiness.

Invite a Sabbath pause.

Choose one common act -- touching a doorknob, turning on a faucet or hearing the phone ring. Throughout the day when this occurs, stop and take three silent, mindful breaths. Then go on.

Take a walk.

Stroll slowly to nowhere in particular for 30 minutes. Let your senses guide you. Stop and observe deeply whatever attracts you -- a tree, a stone, a flower. Breathe.

Pamper your body.

Take a guilt-free nap. Take a leisurely bath with music, special scents, candles. Make love with your spouse. Walk barefoot in the grass. The Sabbath is a day of delight.

Create a Sabbath box.

Put your to-do list, your keys, your wallet -- anything you don't need in Sabbath time -- into the box. Or write down a particular worry or concern and drop it in. Just for now, let it go.

Turn off the telephone.

Or the computer, the TV, the washer and dryer. Create a period of time when you will not be disturbed or seduced by what our technologies demand of us.

Prepare a Sabbath meal -- or a Sabbath cup of tea.

Even if you are alone, you can choose foods you love, put flowers on the table, take time to enjoy every dish, give thanks for the bounty of the earth.

Seek companionship.

One of the most precious gifts we can offer is to be a place of refuge, a Sabbath for one another. Ask for companionship when you lose your way. Give quiet time and attention to others.

Reset your inner compass.

Make a list of the values and principles that guide your life -- both those you follow and those you would like to follow. Speak them aloud, alone or with loved ones.

Surrender a problem.

The Sabbath reminds us that forces larger than ourselves are at work healing the world. Imagine that these forces already know how to solve your problem. Turn it over to their care.