

REST AND BE THANKFUL

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Exodus 20:1-17; Matthew 6:25-33

***“For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea,
and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day;
therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.”***

– Exodus 20:11

One of the little pleasures of traveling away from home is discovering strange place names. Case in point: Truth or Consequences, New Mexico.

Residents of that town voted to change its name from “Hot Springs,” after the host of a national radio show appealed on the air for a town, somewhere in America, to name itself after his show.

There’s a famous town in Wales whose name contains more than fifty letters. To English-speakers, all those consonants are unpronounceable: but a native Welsh speaker can roll those syllables off the tongue with little effort.

Some place names are just odd: in Canada, there’s Medicine Hat, Alberta; Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan; Pickle Lake, Ontario; Blow Me Down, Newfoundland. Closer to home, here in the Jersey Pine Barrens, we have Hog Wallow and Ong’s Hat. In England they have the towns of Simonsbath; Lower Slaughter; Middle Wallop; and Bag Enderby.

If you unfold a road map of Scotland and look at the west country, over by

Loch Lomond, you'll find a spot on the map labeled "Rest and Be Thankful."

That's not an instruction from the map-maker; it's actually the name of a place: mountain pass, noted for its breathtaking view. There's a photo of it on the cover of our bulletin this morning.

The place got its name because, in the days before motorcars, you had to slog through a long, uphill climb to get there. Once you topped the crest of the hill, you found yourself in a broad, level place, with a spectacular vista unfolding before you: made all the sweeter by the knowledge that the road was all downhill from there.

"Rest and be thankful" – not a bad thought for the week ahead: a week which, as we all know, contains our annual Thanksgiving holiday.

Yet resting — and being thankful — are not things we Americans do all that well.... We, the people of the Puritan work ethic.... We, who admiringly describe New York as "the city that never sleeps"... We who believe that, as the modern proverb puts it, "time is money," and organize our lives so as to save as much of the stuff as possible (as though we could really stop time, and save it!).

Some years back, a man named James Gleick wrote a book called *Faster: The Acceleration of Just About Everything*.¹ In it, he makes the case that the

¹Random House, 1999.

rhythms of our daily lives, once slow and stately, are accelerating exponentially. We're like kids on one of those playground merry-go-rounds: lying flat on our backs looking up at the clouds, while some mischievous friend goes charging around in a circle, spinning us so fast, we risk losing our lunch.

One reviewer summarized Gleick's message in this way:

We have become a culture that sleeps less, compulsively presses the door-close button in elevators, opts for speed-dial on our telephones, and day-trades on the Internet. We multitask. Our attention spans have dwindled. We rely on the second hand on our watches and clocks. We absolutely hate to wait, and long to fit as much as we can in as little time as possible.²

The poet William Wordsworth, in the year 1831, visited (along with his wife) that high pass in Scotland known as Rest and Be Thankful. After stopping for a time to catch their breath — and to gaze out in awe at the natural beauty of the place — the poet did what poets do best. He began to formulate the idea for a poem. It's a poem filled with images of what you really can see if you stop and look: of sunbeams shining down like golden streams to nourish the green earth, of hawks slowly circling on the updrafts, of a bright painter's palette of wildflowers. He named his poem, "Rest and Be Thankful! At the Head of Glencroe." I put it in the Worship Notes section of the bulletin, but let me just read it for you:

²Online review at www.barnesandnoble.com.

**Doubling and doubling with laborious walk,
Who, that has gained at length the wished-for Height,
This brief this simple wayside Call can slight,
And rests not thankful? Whether cheered by talk
With some loved friend, or by the unseen hawk
Whistling to clouds and sky-born streams that shine,
At the sun's outbreak, as with light divine,
Ere they descend to nourish root and stalk
Of valley flowers. Nor, while the limbs repose,
Will we forget that, as the fowl can keep
Absolute stillness, poised aloft in air,
And fishes front, unmoved, the torrent's sweep, –
So may the Soul, through powers that Faith bestows,
Win rest, and ease, and peace, with bliss that Angels share.³**

So how may “the Soul, through powers that Faith bestows, Win rest, and ease, and peace?” It seems a fair question for 21st-century folk such as us — we who find it so difficult to slow down that internal clock that constantly screams out, “Faster!”

It so happens that the Bible has a solution to this contemporary dilemma. It's a solution well-known to every one of us — but one we're just as apt to discard as hopelessly old-fashioned. What I'm speaking of is the concept of Sabbath.

It's the Fourth Commandment. Jodi read it for us this morning:

³*Yarrow Revisited, and Other Poems.*

Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work — you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. [Exodus 20:8-10]

In its day, the Fourth Commandment was radical stuff. It dates back, of course, as far as Moses at Mount Sinai, but the versions of it we have in the books of Exodus and Deuteronomy were written down around the time of Israel's exile in Babylon. To those skilled Jewish artisans, forced to serve the Babylonian court as virtual slaves, the Sabbath tradition was a declaration of independence. It was a radical statement of social and economic justice. Imagine – taking one day in seven to rest and be thankful! The Babylonians did nothing of the sort: they drove their captives mercilessly. Surely baffled by this strange Hebrew custom. Yet the Jewish exiles clung to it so tenaciously that their overlords had no choice but to allow them this weekly day of rest and spiritual obligation.

As Old-Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann has said, “Sabbath is an act of refusal and resistance, a vigorous assertion of a different identity grounded in God’s freedom.”⁴ And you thought Sabbath-keeping was just a bunch of nit-picking Blue Laws!

⁴“Sabbath As Active Faith,” in *Journeyers*, newsletter of the Spirituality Program at Columbia Theological Seminary, 2002, number 1.

In reality, Sabbath is much, much more. Sabbath-keeping is intensely practical: and it's got kindness and compassion at its very heart. Sabbath is God's antidote to stress and burnout.

It also happens to be the world's first fair-labor law. If you carefully consider the words of Exodus 20, you'll see that God means Sabbath to apply to *everyone* in society, bar none: to workers, their children, their slaves, the undocumented aliens — even the livestock. There's one place in scripture where Sabbath is extended even to crop rotation: each farm field is to lay fallow one year in seven: allowing it, too, a chance to rest and be rejuvenated [Exodus 20:10-11].

The simple truth is, you and I need Sabbath in order to function at our best. The personal-productivity expert Stephen Covey, in his bestseller, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, teaches a sort of secular Sabbath discipline he calls “sharpening the saw.” Covey tells a little parable of two lumberjacks who are laboring hard to cut down a mighty tree, using one of those old-fashioned cross-cut saws. Back and forth they pull their saw, their motions synchronized with each other in perfect rhythm. Yet the longer they work, the less effective their labors appear to be. Each stroke of the saw seems to be taking less of a bite out of the tree trunk. But still the men keep sawing.

What they need to do, Covey points out, is to stop and sharpen the saw. But

there's something hypnotic about the rhythm of their work. The more exhausted they become, the more easy it is to imagine that if they just keep working harder, they'll finish the job. "Who's got time to stop and sharpen the saw?" they think: "There's work to be done!"

The irony, of course, is that if they *would* stop and perform this essential maintenance, they'd be done their work in half the time: and without the agony of aching muscles and shortness of breath. That's what Sabbath is for: to sharpen the saw.

In the words of psychologist Rollo May, "It is an old and ironic habit of human beings to run faster when we have lost our way."

In our culture, "Remember the Sabbath Day" is one of the most frequently-broken of the Ten Commandments. I think the all-time most-frequently broken commandment is number ten, "Thou shalt not covet"; most of us break that one every time we salivate over the latest and greatest luxury product. But we often break commandment number four as well. You and I break that commandment every time we tell ourselves that stopping to rest is a waste of time, that it's somehow unvirtuous: when the scriptures teach exactly the opposite.

Where does that so-called "Puritan work ethic" of ours come from, anyway? Not from the Puritans, that's for sure! The real Puritans — and their close cousins,

the Pilgrims of Plymouth — came to this country at great risk to their lives, so that among other things, they would be free to observe the biblical Sabbath as they saw fit. Seventeenth-century England, in their opinion, did not respect God’s law enough — and so they journeyed halfway around the world to set up what they called “a holy commonwealth,” complete with laws that would enforce one day of rest in every seven.

The remnants of those colonial Sabbath laws — the municipal ordinances we’ve come to ridicule as “Blue Laws,” named for the color paper they were first printed on — seem to us oppressive. We sneer at those few communities that still enforce Sunday store-closings: although, even as we sneer, our heart-muscles are slowly wearing out from sleep deprivation, and rarely can we find the time to enjoy a leisurely meal with those we love. “Rest and be thankful” – not likely!

Except on Thanksgiving. This blessed day still remains an island of calm in the midst of our national torrent of over-achievement. Other holidays – Christmas especially, and increasingly, even Easter — have become occasions for frantic commercial and social activity. Yet nobody counts shopping days before Thanksgiving, or runs up a credit-card balance to buy the kids cute new Turkey-Day outfits.

In June of 2000, the writer Anna Quindlen gave a commencement address at Villanova University. It's found its way into the quotation books. It's a talk filled with practical wisdom of various kinds, not the least of which is the importance of a regular discipline very similar to Sabbath:

So here's what I wanted to tell you today: get a life. A real life, not a manic pursuit of the next promotion, the bigger paycheck, the larger house.

Do you think you'd care so very much about those things if you blew an aneurysm one afternoon, or found a lump in your breast? Get a life in which you notice the smell of salt water pushing itself on a breeze over Seaside Heights, a life in which you stop and watch how a red tailed hawk circles over the Water Gap or the way a baby scowls with concentration when she tries to pick up a Cheerio with her thumb and first finger.

Get a life in which you are not alone. Find people you love, and who love you. And remember that love is not leisure, it is work....

Get a life in which you are generous. Look around at the azaleas in the suburban neighborhood where you grew up; look at a full moon hanging silver in a black, black sky on a cold night. And realize that life is the best thing ever, and that you have no business taking it for granted.⁵

To keep Sabbath is to be about the business of not taking life for granted.

The poet Jane Kenyon captured this sort of intentional focus in a little poem titled with the single word, "Otherwise." She wrote it at a time when her husband was

⁵Anna Quindlen, commencement address at Villanova University, June 23, 2000.

facing a second major cancer operation. (Ironically, she would predecease him – dying, unexpectedly, of leukemia.) But here’s what she wrote:

The full text of “Otherwise,” by Jane Kenyon, can be viewed here:

<https://poets.org/poem/otherwise>

Another way to look at it is to say that Sabbath is not so much about doing, as being. The spiritual writer Evelyn Underhill says something very much like this as she writes:

We spend [our] lives conjugating three verbs: to Want, to Have, and to Do. Craving, clutching, and fussing, on the material, political, social, emotional, intellectual — even on the religious plane, we are kept in perpetual unrest: forgetting that none of these have any ultimate significance, except so far as they are transcended by and included in the fundamental verb, to Be: and that Being, not wanting, having, and doing, is the essence of a spiritual life.⁶

So this Thursday, why don’t you give that a try? Try stepping away, for just one day, from all your doing. Focus simply on being. Savor not only the turkey and the sweet potatoes, but also the life God has given you. Hold hands with someone you love, as together you ask the blessing. Dip your biscuit in the gravy. Ignore that cranberry-colored spot that’s appeared on the tablecloth. Take a walk

⁶*Advent with Evelyn Underhill* (Church Publishing, 2006), 43.

through the woods afterwards, to aid your digestion. Know that life is short, and love is eternal. Rest — and be thankful!

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