



August 3, 2022

Beloved of God,

In less than a week I will spend my last day in the office orienting our sabbatical pastor, the Rev. Gene Fisher, to our church and ministry before my sabbatical begins next Tuesday, August 9. Many of you have asked me what I plan to “do” on my sabbatical. Before I share some of my plans, allow me to explain a bit more what a sabbatical is—and is not.

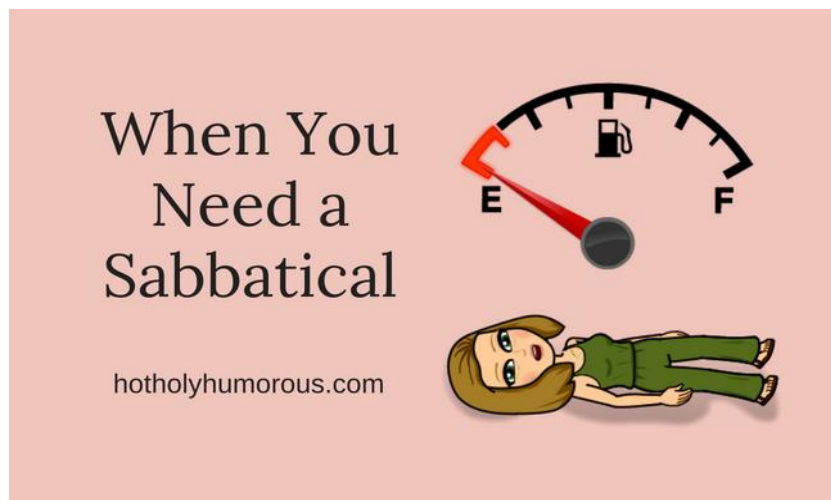
“Sabbath” is a Hebrew word שָׁבַת meaning “to rest, to cease.” On the day of Sabbath, God invites us to cease our work, daily routines and activities, just as God did, “Then God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done (Genesis 2:3).

We have a Sabbath day at the end of every week, and the book of Leviticus also refers to a Sabbath year when the land was to lay fallow. To “remember the Sabbath” is to remember that God is Creator and Sustainer of our lives and of the world. We are partners with God, co-creators of an ongoing creation, but we cannot sustain ourselves or the world on our own. The Sabbath, thus, is our regular invitation to pause from our daily lives to rest and remember who the Sustainer of our lives is by resting in that Sustenance. A sabbatical is an extended sabbath observed over a longer period of time.

Dr. Bill Gauthier, spiritual director for clergy, writes, “A Sabbatical is *not* a long vacation. It’s not a time to read books on leadership or visit [other] churches to learn from them. It’s not a time to write a book, do research, or work on some other special project. These are good things to do and it’s not that you *can’t* do any of them on a Sabbatical, but they work against the spirit of Biblical Sabbath rest. A true Sabbatical is a season of Sabbath for *prolonged rest*. It’s like stringing together a number of Sabbath days. It’s an extended time in which you do no work. You do no pastoring, no leading, no ministering, no visioning the future of the church, no sermon planning. You don’t try to accomplish anything big.”

In other words, you simply rest. You simply are. Sabbatical is about *being* instead of doing.

Part of saying “yes!” to the call of full-time Christian ministry is accepting responsibility to be present—accessible and available—to a congregation and community. While I have certain days I strive to honor as sabbath days, seldom is it possible for me to do so. The rhythm of a pastor’s life is different from that of those a pastor serves. It is impossible to know when someone may land in the hospital, experience a crisis, or cross over from this life to the next. The pandemic has also demanded adaptations to every aspect of our ministry. I had to reinvent my way of working and how we operated as a church. From preaching in front of a camera to attempting to hold cohesive space for a community who could not come together in person was challenging and exhausting. It was also fascinating—but draining, nonetheless.



My time of sabbatical will be a season of rest, reflection, reconnecting, and renewal. It will also be an opportunity for you as a congregation to reflect. I believe that God’s prayer for us is to be in prayer with one another during this time apart so as to go even more deeply into the heart of what it means to be connected by the Holy Spirit within and between us.

My Sabbatical as Spiritual Pilgrimage

I will begin my sabbatical sleeping in late and decompressing a few days! Then I’ll make my way to my beloved Chautauqua Institution. The theme of the week is “A Vibrant Tapestry: Exploring Creativity, Culture, and Faith.” After listening to lectures and participating in dynamic worship, attending concerts, walking by the lake, kayaking, and reconnecting with friends, I will journey to Virginia to reconnect with friends from my Up With People cast (I traveled 1989-90!).

Soon after, I will land in London where I’ll stay with my best friend from college and her sons (my godsons). We’ll travel to Norwich to visit the cell and church center of Christian mystic Julian of Norwich. From there we’ll go to Lindisfarne, or Holy Island, where we’ll listen to seals, stroll the island, and breathe the holy air. Lindisfarne is what is referred to in Celtic spirituality as a “thin place” where there seems to be no distinction between heaven and earth, God and humanity.

From the UK I’ll travel to France where my husband will join me for two weeks in his homeland. I’m so excited to reconnect with his mother and grandma, whom I haven’t seen in eight years. They live in a small artistic town in Burgundy. In addition to time with family, we will visit some spiritual sites including Fontenay, the oldest Cistercian abbey in the world, and the Basilica of Saint

Mary Magdalene of Vézelay, where her relics are located. Vézelay is also a departure point for the Camino de Santiago (The Way of St. James) pilgrimage and thus quite spiritually vibrant.

I'll then fly to Dubrovnik, Croatia where my dear friend Marko will meet me. After relaxing in this stunning gem on the Adriatic Coast, we'll drive to his home in Međugorje, Herzegovina, where apparitions of Mary occurred in the early 1980s. Now a major pilgrimage for seekers of peace and healing, my friend Marko and his father established the first private university in Herzegovina where religious pilgrimages and "sacred travel" are now a subject of academic research. I will experience the richness of what was a sleepy little village turned global pilgrimage site. Marko's daughter, Sara, is my goddaughter so I will also savor the time with her; I have been a part of this family since my early 20s when I was a young missionary and Marko a young refugee in war-time.

When it feels right to move on from Međugorje, I will then make my way to Sarajevo, Bosnia. Sarajevo is, quite simply, my spiritual home and Bosnia my spiritual landscape. This is the place that "raised" and challenged and inspired me as a young peace activist and missionary and became my home away from home throughout my 20s. Sarajevo is a diverse and multi-religious city and the crossroads of cultures and religions in the Balkans, referred to as the "Jerusalem of Europe."



I will stay with the most important mentor in my life, Father Ivo Marković, at the Franciscan Theological Seminary where he teaches. I have known the priests and brothers there for almost 30 years now, so they are used to this American Protestant female pastor (a rare breed for them!). The seminary is residential and has guest rooms. I will eat with the Franciscans, attend mass, and spend time both in silence and in

conversation with them. It is also a wonderful homebase for me while in Sarajevo, where I will spend the bulk of my sabbatical time reconnecting with precious friends, my interfaith choir *Pontanima*, and most especially Fra Ivo. I can't wait to sing again with my choir, attend a concert, spend time doing nothing while slowly sipping Turkish coffee in cafés, and recall a time, people and place that so profoundly shaped me and the way I understand and move through the world.

My flight from Sarajevo back to the States will get me home in time for Thanksgiving with my family and a few days to transition back to my life here. I return to the pulpit on the first Sunday of Advent, November 27.

I invite you to pray with me during this time of sabbatical, just as I will be holding you in prayer and love. You will be in my heart and with me in spirit as I will be with you, through Christ Jesus our Lord and the power of the Holy Spirit which transcends space and time.

May you be blessed with rest and renewal in the Holy One,
Pastor Amy

P.S. For more insight on Sabbath, I recommend *Sabbath as Resistance* by Walter Brueggemann.