

Earth Sabbath: A Paradise in Time

Sermon Reprint by Rev. Tess Baumberger
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A Paradise in Time

My interest in observing a weekly Sabbath began last summer when my son and I moved to Sharon. About seventy percent of people in our town are Jewish. Never have I lived somewhere with such a large Jewish population. Weekends are different because of the number of people who observe the Sabbath in the traditional way.

On Friday afternoons grocery stores are busy with people buying foods as they prepare for it. As sunset brings the start of the Sabbath, a quiet falls over the town. Part of Sabbath observance is ceasing all work and productive activity, resting in the peace this ceasing brings to your home and your heart, and celebrating it with loved ones.

This ceasing, resting, and celebrating is based on the biblical story of Yahweh creating the world in six days and then resting on the seventh day in order to enjoy and celebrate the results. The creation story also claims that we humans were formed in Yahweh's image. So it follows that we also need a day, one day out of every seven, to enjoy the results of our productive and creative activities the other six days.

Friday nights observant Jews light candles, say special prayers, and have a meal to welcome Queen Sabbath into the home. Saturday mornings you see people walking to temple in order to celebrate with their religious communities. Sabbath laws prohibit even lighting fires on the Sabbath, and since cars operate by internal combustion, strictly observant Jews don't drive that day. Saturday afternoons in Sharon, you see families taking walks together. They seem both quiet and happy. It's restful just to see them.

A couple months ago my spiritual director (who is Catholic) asked about my weekly day off. Like many of us, I tend to spend my day off "catching up" on all the things I "don't have time to do" the other days, like planning menus, buying groceries, doing laundry, paying bills, and cleaning the house. My spiritual director was aghast.

She directed me to begin Sabbath-making and Sabbath-taking. She declared, "No work from sundown Wednesday night to sundown Thursday night. Make food ahead of time so it needs only minimal preparation. Have some clean pajamas to put on that night

and clean bedding. Have your house orderly enough not to drive you crazy. Create rituals to observe your Sabbath's start and ending, and then, simply, rest. Stop. Cease. Create time and space for your spirit to touch the sacred. Rest in its grace. Celebrate.”

A sigh escaped me at the very thought, as it did from members of our ministry committee when I shared this notion with them. It's hard not to think a weekly day of ceasing and resting without longing. A traditional metaphor for the Sabbath captures this longing – the Sabbath is like a bride (or groom), lovely and loving, a companion and support to our lives, that we welcome into our homes with anticipation and gladness.

Our modern lives have become so busy, so packed with work and activity of every kind, that few of us ever truly rest each week. We may have lost sight of the need for rest, and for sacred time. We spend so much time acquiring, but so little time celebrating our bounty with family and friends. Things are a poor substitute for relationships, and for this sort of sacred rest. Sabbaths are a time to *inspire* rather than *acquire*.

So I started observing my own Sabbath. It requires spreading home and self-care over the week, which is actually a sensible and healthy thing to do. You plan menus one day, shop another, take care of finances and errands still another. You do laundry so that you have those clean pajamas and you prepare a simple meal for that first night. We either have leftovers or go out for dinner as Sabbath ends. It's becoming a tradition.

Some rituals I have adopted and adapted from the Jewish tradition, such as lighting candles at sunset and saying a special prayer of thanks and celebration before dinner. Other rituals are my own- like taking what I call my *Sab-bath* (my son is already sick of that joke). While dinner cooks that first night I run a hot bath, light a couple of candles, and soak while listening to sacred music. It's heaven.

That's how Abraham Heschel describes the Sabbath – as a paradise in time. We spend the rest of the week living in space, he says. We work to acquire and maintain the things we need to live in this world. The Sabbath is about time rather than space, sacred time to nurture our spirits and our relationships, and to enjoy the earth's goodness.

We're not meant to labor every day. A pattern of six days of work and one of rest have emerged in several different cultures around the world. This makes sense because research shows that our natural sleep cycles require a “catch up” day once a week. Our bodies know they need rest, and Sabbath traditions capture that bodily wisdom.

We're not meant to labor every day. We cannot sustain such a pace and neither can our world. In the Jewish tradition, the Sabbath is a time of rest not just for the wealthy, but for servants and slaves. Ancient Hebrews did own slaves, but it wasn't like slavery was here. Sabbath laws stipulate rest for beasts of burden, and even for the earth itself.

In fact, Sabbath laws fit with our current concerns for justice, and the ecological consciousness that rises as Earth Day approaches. Every seventh year the ancient Jews let their land lie fallow (meaning they didn't plant anything). They prepared for this by storing up food the previous six years.

Every 49th year was a Jubilee year. Tribal lands were returned to their original owners, debts were excused, slaves and prisoners were set free. Sabbath laws were not just about rest, in other words, they were about restoration. Sabbath observance is intimately tied both to economic justice and to ecology.

By recognizing and celebrating our bounty, Sabbath reminds us to share it with the less fortunate. We are all on this planet together. We are all children of this Earth. By practicing rest for our selves and our earth, by ceasing all productive activity, refraining from spending money and acquiring stuff one day a week, we could reduce our impact on the earth by 14 percent. That's nothing to sneeze at.

We often make New Year's resolutions – why not Earth Day resolutions? If you can't justify taking a Sabbath for your own physical, emotional, and spiritual health and for the good of your relationships, then consider taking one for our world. See what happens in your life when you create your own paradise in time.

<interlude, sing 'Tis a Gift to be Simple>

Reading

From "Wendell Berry's Vision of Sabbath, Ecology, and Poetry" by E. Graeme Sharrock published in Spectrum Magazine in 2000

The article talks about how the poet and environmentalist prefers Sabbath walks around his farm in Kentucky to worshipping in a church. It explores and extols the poetry that emerges from Berry's communion with nature.

“Since the recent rise of ecological consciousness, keeping Sabbath means standing in solidarity with an abused creation against environmental pollution, sprawling urbanization, and irresponsible capitalism. Even to sing to our Creator, like the water thrush at sunset - “the Sabbath of our day” – requires “air worthy of breath, of all singers that sing...” rather than a tainted atmosphere. Sabbath also needs quiet, the kind that returns at the end of vacation when “The fume and shock and uproar/ of the internal combustions of America recede....” Instead of focusing on *observance* (an unfortunate word that perpetuates the spectator stance of modernity), this poetic theology of the Sabbath values *participation* with nature and *protest* against the abuse of creation.

“In his essays and poems, Berry combines ancient traditions with a current concern for both natural and human communities, for “traditions have always bound poetry to the concerns and values of the spirit.” The Sabbath exists alongside the wheel of life, the cycle of the seasons, the ancient circle of the dance, the ascent and descent of gravity – other cyclical metaphors linking time and spirit. Berry incorporates Native American ethics and Hindu cosmology as easily as Judeo-Christian symbols and criticizes Western Christianity’s preference for the spirit when it derogates the body and nature.”

“In polishing those eloquent jewels, Wendell Berry has shown us that our most evocative theological expressions may not come from systematic or reason-driven thought but from the meditative, Sabbath-like space of poetry.”

Earth Sabbath

Speaking of Earth Day resolutions, when I read this article about Wendell Berry, and connections between Sabbath and ecology in his poems, I resolved to do more than just a “book report” sermon about the Sabbath today.

Because it is National Poetry Month and because Earth Day is this next week, it seems right to honor today’s Sabbath with the poetry of nature and of rest. Such poems allow us not only to talk about the concept of the Sabbath, but also to experience it through the eyes and the words of the poet.

First from Wendell Berry, who observes the Sabbath by walking around his Kentucky farm. His collection “A Timbered Choir: The Sabbath Poems 1979-1997” includes this poem inspired by one such walk.

Sabbaths 1979 – I.

I go among trees and sit still.
All my stirring becomes quiet
around me like circles on water.

My tasks lie in their places
where I left them, asleep like cattle.

Then what is afraid of me comes
and lives a while in my sight.
What it fears in me leaves me,
and the fear of me leaves it.
It sings, and I hear its song.

Then what I am afraid of comes.
I live for a while in its sight.
What I fear in it leaves it,
and the fear of it leaves me.
It sings, and I hear its song.

After days of labor,
mute in my consternations,
I hear my song at last,
and I sing it. As we sing,
the day turns, the trees move.

Speaking of singing, I love this poem by Mary Oliver, also written about a Sabbath walk in nature, at around this time of year.

The Fawn

Sunday morning and mellow as precious metal

the church bells rang, but I went

to the woods instead.

A fawn, too new

for fear, rose from the grass

and stood with its spots blazing,

and knowing no way but words,

no trick but music,

I sang to him.

He listened.

His small hooves struck the grass.

Oh what is holiness?

The fawn came closer,

walked to my hands, to my knees.

I did not touch him.

I only sang, and when the doe came back

calling out to him dolefully

and he turned and followed her into the trees,

still I sang,

not knowing how to end such a joyful text,

until far off the bells once more tipped and tumbled

and rang through the morning, announcing

the going forth of the blessed.

It seems presumptuous to place myself in the company of poets like Wendell Berry and Mary Oliver. But what the heck? It's National Poetry Month! So here's a poem from Sabbath walk in the redwoods of northern California....

Silver Serpent

I want to dapple like the sun
on the forest floor,
feel the cool of the shade
in the places where my light is blocked,
sense what it's like to be dark.

I want to lie still and rest on the earth
like that branch there,
and watch my bark peel off
and feel tiny ant feet along my back
and provide shelter for a snail.

I want to gather energy from the sun
like the clover, shoring it up in
heart-shaped leaves, threed on my stem,
against a backdrop of brown needles.

I want to spread slowly like the moss,
sipping moisture from laden air
through green straws of self.

I want to dig deep and stretch tall
like the redwood trees,
brave, not bowed by tiny things
like contradiction and memory.

I want to hope like the ferns,
frond arms praying splayed,
cool and unperturbed.

I'd like to be worn smooth by love,
constantly washing over me,
softening my jagged edges,
rock cradled in a stream,
gem polished agate beautiful,
shining like a silver serpent
in the rain.

Trees are important spiritual symbols for me, as in this poem from another walk –
not necessarily on an ordained Sabbath, but one of those spontaneous ones....

Meditation

To live the life of a tree,
 To stand and rest
 so silent, so composed,
 each day a meditation.
 To feel your toes
 curled in the earth,
 to feel your limbs
 stretching to the sky,
 claiming sun and life.
 To feel yourself expanding
 as each ringing year drops
 a pebble into your pool.
 To feel your thick skin
 crackle as you grow.
 To cloak yourself slowly
 in green hoar-frost mosses,
 gurry, drinking mist.
 To spread your several hands
 in diverse directions.
 To feel your thousand fingers
 drumming in the wind.
 To feel your blood flow
 down in long-drawn winter,
 hunkered under earth,
 then whistle up again in spring,
 and burst a chorus of buds,
 an enthusiasm in green.
 To drink the sun in gracefully.
 To breath out slowly oxygen.
 To stand observing everything.
 The patience of a tree.

Sabbath rest, letting your spirit touch what is most sacred to you, can include meditation and prayer, if you do those things. Part of meditating is being mindful, as in this poem by Mary Oliver.

Mindful

By Mary Oliver from *Why I Wake Early*

Every day
 I see or hear
 something
 that more or less

kills me
with delight,
that leaves me
like a needle

in the haystack
of light.
It was what I was born for -
to look, to listen,

to lose myself
inside this soft world -
to instruct myself
over and over

in joy,
and acclamation.
Nor am I talking
about the exceptional,

the fearful, the dreadful,
the very extravagant -
but of the ordinary,
the common, the very drab,

the daily presentations.
Oh, good scholar,
I say to myself,
how can you help

but grow wise
with such teachings
as these -
the untrimmable light

of the world,
the ocean's shine,
the prayers that are made
out of grass?

And to conclude this meditation made of Sabbath poems, another by Wendell Berry, written twenty years after his 1979 Sabbath poem that I read just a few minutes ago.

Sabbaths 1999, VII -

Again I resume the long
 lesson: how small a thing
 can be pleasing, how little
 in this hard world it takes
 to satisfy the mind
 and bring it to its rest.

With the ongoing havoc
 the woods this morning is
 almost unnaturally still.
 Through stalled air, unshadowed
 light, a few leaves fall
 of their own weight.

The sky
 is gray. It begins in mist
 almost at the ground
 and rises forever. The trees
 rise in silence almost
 natural, but not quite,
 almost eternal, but
 not quite.

What more did I
 think I wanted? Here is
 what has always been.
 Here is what will always
 be. Even in me,
 the Maker of all this
 returns in rest, even
 to the slightest of His works,
 a yellow leaf slowly
 falling, and is pleased.

~ Wendell Berry ~

(Given)

The idea that the Maker returns to rest in us takes me back to something that struck me in my reading about the Sabbath – that it is not just us that long for the Sabbath, that the Sabbath also longs for its fulfillment in us. Using the metaphor of the bride or groom, there is mutual longing in this partnership.

The Sabbath, according to some Jewish teachers, is always there, whether we recognize it or not. This means it is something we can enter into at any day of the week, that sacred time in which our spirits can rest. By recognizing the Sabbath, ceasing, resting, and rejoicing in creation's beauty, we can allow the earth to rest as well, that all may be renewed, that all may be restored. May it be so. Blessed Be.