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 First Sunday Lent
 Celebrating Black History

What is Sabbath? Gen 2:1-4

Thus the heavens and the earth were finished and all their multitude. ² On the sixth^[a] day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. ³ So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation.

What do you do for Sabbath?

What leads you into this special practice of rest?

And what is Sabbath, really?

Ruth Haley Barton has written a great book about Sabbath, called *Embracing Rhythms of Work and Rest*.

In her book she acknowledges her struggle with taking a Sabbath. She felt like her work and family obligations were simply too much to take a break one day a week.

That is, until she got hit by a car while riding her bike, and instead of taking time off work to really recover, she went right back to work! A friend encouraged her to take some time off, and she felt God nudging her to do more than that—to take a Sabbath, each and every week.

She says that she kept thinking about Wayne Muller's book entitled *Sabbath*, and his quote: "*If we do not allow for a rhythm of rest in our overly busy lives, illness becomes our Sabbath—our pneumonia, our cancer, our heart attack, our accidents create Sabbaths for us.*" Ruth Haley Barton, *Embracing Rhythms of Work and Rest*, Intervarsity: Illinois, 2022, pg. 7

Have you ever known that to be ***true in YOUR life?***

I know I have.

Barton writes about how she didn't want to admit her need for Sabbath rest, of any kind.

But she felt that after her accident,
God was trying to tell her something about Sabbath rest.

My spiritual director, Janis Sharpe,
once heard one of her directors say that everyone
takes the *same amount of time off* of work throughout their lives—
some take it in Sabbath and vacations, others take it in illness.

I think we know this deep down in our souls.
The issue is *doing something about it*.
It takes *time, energy and effort* to set up a Sabbath practice, doesn't it?
It's so much easier to just keep on going and going....
But, isn't it better to take a time of rest instead of a time of illness or distress?

So, if Sabbath is so important, what IS it?
What is Sabbath rest?
The word Sabbath means to stop, cease, or rest.

And where did the idea of Sabbath originate?

In the story of Creation itself.
Sabbath is something God created.
The story goes that God created everything in heaven and earth, including us,
in 6 days. And then on the 7th day—
God *rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done.* ³ So God ***blessed***
the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he
had done in creation.

Now sometimes people get so wrapped up in
trying to decide if the creation story is *literally true*.
Like, did God create everything in 6 24-hour days?
But what if we stopped trying to take it literally, and took it *seriously* instead?
Carol Betchel asks this question in the PW Horizons Bible study for this year.
That study is entitled: "*Celebrating Sabbath: Accepting God's Gift of Rest and*
Delight", and it's where Pastor Diane and I got the idea of our Lenten focus.

So what if we looked at the *point of the creation story—not its literal meaning*.
And what if we asked, what is the lesson it brings to our lives TODAY?
What does it mean that God created a day of rest for us?
And what does it mean that the day of rest became a holy, blessed day?

Let's think about this---God made a day of rest, after creating everything else!
God ceased the work of creation, and simply enjoyed it on the 7th day!

Imagine that!

God didn't rest because God was tired. God doesn't get tired.

And God is not a workaholic (although if anyone could be, it would be God!)

God just rested to enjoy creation!

God rested because this is the *model for our lives today*---

To create, work, then rest and enjoy!

But how often do we follow this *rhythm of work and rest*,
the very rhythm that God made for us?

In the Jewish tradition Sabbath, or Shabbat, is a pivotal 24-hour period each week.
It is their way to *order life*.

Sabbath is from sundown on Friday to sundown on Saturday.

It begins and ends with ritual and liturgy,

With enjoying time as a family, as a community, sharing a meal together.

Sabbath for Jews begins essentially with rest—

because it all starts at the end of the day on Friday,
a time when work ceases.

In the Jewish tradition,

Sabbath is known as *the 'crown' of creation*—not an afterthought.

Sabbath rest is the *pinnacle* of what God did in the creation story.

(Some of us think that God's creation of humanity is the pinnacle—
but what if it's not all about us!?)

God made rest.

God created what the Jewish people call *menuha*—which means tranquility,
serenity, peace, and rest.

One of the most famous books on rest is the book *Sabbath* by Abraham Heschel,
written in 1951. It is a beautiful, poetic book!

Heschel calls the Sabbath "*a cathedral in time*".

It is not a place, or a space, it is a *beautiful period of time*, each and every week.

He refers to it as a miracle, as the resurrection of the soul.

Abraham Heschel, *The Sabbath*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux: NY, 1951, Pg. 13-24

Now, I don't know about you—but I could use a *resurrection of the soul*,
Each and every week, right?

In fact, the Hebrew root for both *“soul” and “rest” is nephesh.*

So, Sabbath is important not just for our psychological and physical health, it touches our soul.

Megan Cullip on Patheos writes that Sabbath is a time of soul-union with God.

We may not be consistent in keeping Sabbath.

But Sabbath has always been the ‘reset button’, whenever God’s people lost their way.

Sabbath is a compassionate gift that we have the permission to offer ourselves.

<https://www.patheos.com/blogs/christiansingeneral/2021/10/sabbath-for-healthcare-workers/>

Ruth Haley Barton says that Sabbath is about *being human*, and honoring our need to rest and be refreshed, and our soul’s need to *delight in God*.

You know what I think?

I think that Sabbath reminds us that *God is God, and we are not.*

We are not superhuman.

We are mortal, we are finite, we have limits, that must respect.

This is what we heard on Ash Wednesday this week,

when we received the cross in ashes on our foreheads and heard the words

“You are dust and to dust you will return”.

Barton says: *“By being faithful to a sabbath practice, we are saying in a very concrete way: “God is the only one who can be all things to all people...the only one who can be in two places at once.. the one who never sleeps...” (97R).*

What else is Sabbath?

Sabbath is a GIFT from God for each one of us!

It starts in Creation—but it is a gift for people of all times and places.

It is a reminder that we are human **‘beings’** not human **‘doings’**.

We are first and foremost children of God,

and sabbath reminds us ***who we are, and whose we are.***

We were made for this Sabbath rest.

Sabbath is more about saying ***‘yes’ to life with God, than saying ‘no’ to work.***

Sabbath is not really a burden, or about what not to do.

It is actually an incredible blessing to us—it’s about ***freedom---***

For rest, for peace, for time with God, friends, family.

Time to be refreshed.

What could that mean in YOUR life?

Sabbath is also about finding a *deeper friendship with God*.

When was the last time you thought about being ‘friends’ with God?

Friends with Jesus?

Jesus invites us into a friendship with him—

he calls his disciples ‘friends’ in the Gospel of John Chapter 15.

Carol Betchel of the PW Study,

encourages us to think about the fact that God created Sabbath *to enjoy all of us!*

Let’s look at this another way.

With whom do you like to share your down time?

Who do you call to join you when you relax?

Friends? Family? Church?

That’s how God feels about sharing sabbath with us!

What if we felt that way about sharing sabbath with God?

What if we ARE created to *enjoy time with God* on the Sabbath?

In the Jewish tradition, the Sabbath is known as *the ‘BRIDE’* that we welcome!

This is one reason why Sabbath begins and ends intentionally,

with ritual, prayers, songs, and a meal.

The greeting is Shabbat Shalom!

And sometimes Sabbath keepers even share *cinnamon and cloves* as a symbol of the sweetness of the Sabbath day!

Carol Betchel, “Celebrating Sabbath: Accepting God’s Gift of Rest and Delight” PW Horizons Bible Study 2022-2023, pg. 15

What else is Sabbath?

Sabbath is a COMMANDMENT of God—not just a suggestion!

Sabbath is the fourth of the 10 commandments.

The first four are about our relationship with God,

The last six are about our relationships with one another.

This means that taking Sabbath rest is about our relationship with God,

And, it’s *just as important* as avoiding idols,

or not committing murder, or stealing, lying, or coveting!

What does it *mean to you*, that Sabbath is a *command*?

I think it means that Sabbath rest *isn’t always easy*—

we have to make time, which means making a commitment.
 But what if we looked at Sabbath,
 the way we look at our *technology or computers*?
 Whenever my phone or computer is acting up,
 Ed says those infamous words of IT nerds everywhere:
 Did you turn it off and then back on?
 Did you unplug it? Did you reboot?

What if there's a lesson for us?
 About how important it is as human beings,
 to *shut down once and week, and reboot our lives*?
 What if shutting down and rebooting helps us find the energy we need
 to keep going? To deal with problems? To work even better?

What is Sabbath?
Sabbath is a GOAL for us to pursue.
 For some, a 24-hour Sabbath is too lofty a goal.
 And for some, a Sabbath day is not necessarily on a Sunday.
 I take Fridays for Sabbath, since I am working on Sunday.

If 24 hours is too lofty a goal, that's ok.
 We can start with an hour, or two, or half a day.
 God honors our desire, and our commitment to do this.

So we start with some amount of time—
 however long, when we stop working, and we rest.
 Instead of working, we concentrate on being a child of God.
 Instead of working, we focus on enjoying God, and God's creation,
 Whether that's on our own, or ideally with others, in community.

Of course, we know that *emergencies* will happen.
 Even God acknowledges that emergencies happen on the Sabbath.
 Jesus himself heals and helps people on the Sabbath day.
 Sabbath is made for us, not us for the Sabbath.

So, *how can you take moments, or hours* out of a day to pursue Sabbath rest?
 How can you put down your work?
 Can you put away your computer and phone,
 and take a walk outside?
 Can you curl up with a good book or beautiful music,

and let your soul be refreshed?
 Can you spend time with friends or family,
 and just enjoy one another's company? Over a meal? Good fellowship?
 What about worshipping together?

I know this might sound challenging.

After all, ***busy-ness is a badge of honor*** for most of us.
 How do we usually greet one another?
 How are you?
 Oh, I'm so busy.
 I'm tired.
 I'm overwhelmed with all I have to do.
 This is the story of our lives.

But Sabbath is an acknowledgment that ***the world can get along without us!***
 We are not indispensable.
 Our jobs can and will continue—without us.
 Life can go on without our work.

Today we are ***celebrating Black History***,
 and we would be remiss if we didn't acknowledge
 that throughout our history there have been times, including today,
 when some of our black brothers and sisters could not take a Sabbath day.

They were forced to work, as enslaved people,
 Or they are forced to work, just to survive and provide for a family.
 Those who are essential workers,
 May be holding down not one, but two or three jobs—just to make ends meet.
 The idea of a 24-hour Sabbath may be practically impossible.

What does this mean for us?

This means that we are all called to stand up for those who cannot rest.
 We are called to work for the kind of change that enables people to rest,
 to exist well with one job, not three.
 This is part of ***God's command*** as well, that all people can enjoy Sabbath rest,
 And it is part of ***God's justice***,
 to make sure that all are afforded this gift and opportunity.

Sabbath has a history within the Bible of ***being about freedom***.

In fact, in Deuteronomy 5:15 when the 10 commandments are told again,

After the commandment to keep the Sabbath day, Moses says this:

*Remember that you were a **slave** in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God **brought you out** from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; **therefore** the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day.*

In other words, we ***celebrate Sabbath because our God brings freedom***.

And we know that not all people are free.

So we work for freedom, for all of God's children,

And we remember that our own celebration of Sabbath is about being free.

All throughout this season of Lent, will celebrate Sabbath rest.

Each week we'll have different activities to engage our senses.

Today I want to pass around some cinnamon and cloves for us to smell.

As you smell it, remember that Sabbath rest is something sweet!

Sabbath is a gift of life and refreshment,

So, how will ***YOU accept this gift*** of God?

How will ***YOU make time***—for God?

For the rest that is OUR rest?

Friends, hear the ***Good News of the Gospel*** today:

Sabbath is part of God's good creation,

It is a commandment,

It is a blessing,

It is a gift—for all God's people.

May we welcome this gift, and enjoy the refreshment that it brings.

And for the gift, all God's people can say together: Amen.