

# “Better Than a Nap”

## WORDS of FAITH: SABBATH

Matthew 12:1-14 and Deuteronomy 5:12-15

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In this WORDS of FAITH series, our hope is that you'll take some time to ponder specific words of our tradition and maybe discover new meaning and relevance for today.

Our word for today is SABBATH. In the gospel lesson, Jesus is being challenged by the Pharisees, and he has strong words for their legalistic understanding of things. But his critique is of their interpretation of the Sabbath, not of the concept itself. As we see especially in Matthew's gospel, Jesus strives to fulfill the laws of Judaism, with integrity and mercy. He quotes from Hosea, where God's voice affirms: "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." This is a common biblical idea, that our religious activities need to be grounded in ethics.

So Jesus is inviting us by implication to look more deeply into the true meaning of Sabbath.

The Sabbath Commandment is the fourth of the Ten Commandments, words that we share together here at Covenant on the first Sunday of every month. We have paraphrased them as promises: We will not worship idols, etc. In the original language, eight of the ten are negative commandments: "Thou shalt not...." Only the honor the Sabbath and honor your parents commandments are stated affirmatively.

The first three focus on God and the last six focus on human relations. The fourth commandment, on the Sabbath, stands as a bridge between God and humanity.

The ten commandments appear twice in the Bible as a group. In Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5. In the Exodus version of the Sabbath commandment, the people are told to Remember and keep the Sabbath, with reference back to creation and how God rested on the seventh day.

In Deuteronomy, the verbs are switched. The people are told to keep the Sabbath and thus remember that once they were slaves in Egypt, but God rescued them.

As you'll hear, the Sabbath commandment isn't just for the religious insiders, but it's for the outsiders as well, and it's not even just for humans. Listen for God's word.

Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy, as the Lord your God commanded you. 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, or your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock, or the resident alien in your towns, so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you. 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.

Let us pray....

Years ago, in another church we were discussing the Sabbath in a Bible study. A woman named Linda shared that on a recent Sunday after church, she and her husband Jim had gone to the supermarket to pick up a few things. Jim was stunned to see how crowded it was. He said something like, “Look at all the people here—on Sunday, the Sabbath, the day of rest!” Linda just looked at him and said, Jim, we are here too.”

I think a lot of Christian people have an ambivalence about the Sabbath, like Jim, recognizing at some level that Sunday is special but also getting gradually drawn into more and more activity on Sunday. Or at the very least there is a recognition that our lives have gotten too busy and stressed out.

I could make a good argument that Sabbath is the most ignored of all the commandments. I am not advocating that we turn back the clock or enforce Sabbath as a culture. But for those of us who claim to be Christians or people of God, I'd like to encourage us to rethink the Sabbath and find ways to claim it for us today.

At the core, Sabbath is about rest. Genesis tells us that God rested, and so are told to rest as well. Goodness knows we need the rest in our culture today.

We seem to have less time than ever, despite all of our time-saving devices. Our lives are filled to over-flowing, and we always seem to feel the need for more time. Time for:

- More work, more gadgets that we don't know how to use,
- more home improvement projects, more family gatherings,
- more movies and TV, more books and magazines,
- more exercise and fitness, more political involvement,
- and even more church activities....

It's no wonder we are tired and stressed and worried and weary.

The Sabbath commandment is God's powerful reminder that we can't and we shouldn't try to do everything. We need to rest.

When our boys were very young and not sleeping so well, I became a big fan of naps. Naps for them, and naps for me. I saw how they acted when they were tired—they screamed and yelled and weren't exactly delightful bundles of joy.

I realized that when adults get tired, we get cranky and while we might not scream and yell, we aren't exactly bundles of joy.

So I became something of an expert in the power nap—about 15 or 20 minutes of quality rest, to refresh and renew me. To this day I remain a big fan of the 15 to 20 minute power nap, which interestingly is about the same length as a sermon.

In addition to sleep, we need to rest sometimes from work. Too many of us are overly stressed about our work.

I love my work as a pastor, but if I'm not careful, like a lot of jobs, it can be all consuming. There is always something else to do, so I have to intentionally recall the Sabbath commandment, which helps me remember that God is in charge, not me. I try to take Mondays as my Sabbath day, and while sometimes there are emergencies or special situations on Monday, usually it works fine as a Sabbath day. If I let it.

I know I'm not the only person who checks email more often than I need to. I try to avoid doing so on Mondays. I tried especially hard last Monday. A few times during the day, out of habit, I almost clicked on the little icon. But somehow I made it to Tuesday morning without checking email. And miraculously the church and the Kingdom of God survived!

And the added blessing was that on Tuesday I felt more refreshed and more ready than usual to plunge in with my work, and it has been a busy, but very productive week.

So I try to take Monday as a Sabbath day, as a day of rest and renewal and reconnecting with God. How about you? Do you have Sabbath day or Sabbath practices?

Author Barbara Brown Taylor is passionate about Sabbath and she says "I could work like a demon the other six days of the week as long as I knew the seventh was coming." (Christian Century, May 31, 2005)

Ideally the Sabbath would be a large chunk of time, like a full day or even longer. I remember about 25 years ago, I got to spend a week at a beach house in New England, by myself. I unplugged the TV and turned off the clock and I put my watch in a drawer. I ate when I was hungry, read lots of books, went for

bikes rides and swam in the ocean. I went to bed when it was dark and got up in the morning. It was a wonderful week.

But taking a whole week of Sabbath rest is very rare, and even taking a day is pretty challenging for most of us. But that doesn't mean we give up. I think we need to find Sabbath moments, or Sabbath breaks, even if it's just an hour or so.

- Maybe we take a break from technology for the evening, or we go sit outside for 20 minutes and just sit, with nothing to read or do.
- Maybe we ignore the ads on TV and in our email and in the newspaper for a whole week and try to be content with what we have.
- Maybe we give up multitasking for a day, and just do one thing at a time and do it well.

Sabbath gives us rest and refocus. But it's not just for us. It's better than a nap because it's good for society. It is a call for rest for our families and for everyone in the land, including the resident aliens, or immigrants. So maybe if we slow down and don't feel like we have to go shopping all the time, it will help minimum wage workers find some rest.

Sabbath keeping will also give rest to creation, to this big beautiful world that God has entrusted to our care. The earth needs a rest from our restless consumerism. Maybe if we just go for a walk in the park and say hello to our neighbors, life will be better for all of us.

*Sabbath as Resistance: Saying NO to the Culture of Now* is a provocative and spiritual book by Walter Brueggemann, where he warns us about our frenzied lives and the urgency of Sabbath keeping.

“Thus I have come to think that the fourth commandment on sabbath is the most difficult and most urgent of the commandments in our society, because it summons us to intent and conduct that defies the most elemental requirements of a commodity-propelled society that specializes in control and entertainment, bread and circuses ... along with anxiety and violence.”

Sabbath is good for us, and it's good for those around us.

Jesus came to offer us new life, life in all its fullness—not a life of busyness and stress and worry. He came to give us the peace that passes understanding. He came to help us wake up and to really live.

To help us wake up and really live this life, I think we need to make the Sabbath more intentional in our lives. So I encourage you to ponder Sabbath and Sabbath practice this week. And as your pastor, I'd be curious to hear what you're thinking—but not tomorrow

Let us pray.