

“For Signs and for Seasons” / Genesis 1:1-2:4a / 15 June 2014

The sun and the moon and the stars were created, the Book of Genesis states, so that we humans might have “seasons, and days, and years.” It was true in ancient times, and it's still true today, that people need mile-markers in time, meaningful ways to measure out their lives. Isn't it interesting how this whole creation narrative comes down to one life lesson, sabbath? Set aside a day each week—one seventh of your life—for rest, and for play, and for relationship...for sabbath.

I once heard a myth about sabbath keeping among the Presbyterians of old. It was so old that nobody knows how much of it is true, and those who did know are dead. Each Sunday was the sabbath day, in a certain family, and on the sabbath, children were expected to be seen and not heard. On Sunday, you wore your best and least comfortable clothes all day long: the tight, starched collars, the stiff fabrics, the hot jackets. For boys, your mother could tell by Sunday evening whether you'd kept the sabbath just by looking at the crease in your pants. If you'd worn out your crease, then you must have been running and playing, or else lounging around lazily, and either way, you'd failed to keep the sabbath. The sabbath was a day for worship, and prayer, and devotional reading. It was a day for pious thoughts. And so, if your crease was still crisp and sharp by the end of the day, then it was a pretty sure sign that you'd kept your sabbath duties of meditation and prayer. Oh, how children hated Sunday! And all of Sunday's solemnity meant that Saturday was pretty well ruined, too, for on Saturday you had to do double duty on two days' chores. If next week's homework wasn't done by Saturday night, then you might just have to face the teacher's hickory switch on Monday.

Anyhow, the legend says that in between church services, one Sunday, the mother of the family was sitting in the parlor—the fancy room that they only used on Sundays and holidays—and she was meditating on that morning's sermon. (I hope people still do that today.) She was a gentle, pious woman, and after lunch on Sundays, she sent the children to their rooms to do the same thing—to meditate on the sermon—and to prepare themselves for the evening church service. But on this particular Sunday, the kids had sneaked outside and climbed into an apple tree to pick apples. Their mother heard them squealing and laughing on the sabbath, which was fine on Tuesdays, and Fridays, and all other days, but strictly forbidden on Sundays; the sabbath was a day of sober reflection. Worse, they were eating apples up in the branches of the tree. Well, mother was faced with a dilemma. If she ran outside to yell at them, she'd be breaking the sabbath herself, for both things were against the sabbath rules: engaging in strenuous physical activity and raising one's voice. And so, that night, after the second church service, when she was tucking them all into bed, she whispered in each of their ears: “Little one, it would be a wrong for me to spank you on the sabbath...but just you wait till morning!”

Sabbath! What do you think of when you hear the word “sabbath”? Does anything at all come to mind? Of course, if you didn't grow up in church, then you probably only recognize “sabbath” as a Jewish concept, or maybe as the name of Ozzie Osborn's heavy metal band from the 70s and 80s. Sabbath is one of those old religious words that's taken on a sinister acclaim. It sounds like boredom and rules. “Sabbath,” to modern ears, sounds at the very least like the old days when nothing was open on a Sunday except churches and public parks.

And yet, each of us has some method for gauging our journey through time. The ancient wisdom of the Book of Genesis is that we, all of us, need a day each week to escape from the illusion that what we produce is who we are. We, all of us, need a day each week to give ourselves back to our families, to our passions, to our playfulness, and to our God. Indeed, by linking sabbath to the work of creation, Genesis seems to be telling us that if we want to do good, meaningful, “creative” work in this world, then we have to practice sabbath.

“Let there be lights in the sky,” the Creator declares, in the first chapter of the Book of Genesis. “Let there be lights to separate the day from the night, and for signs, and for seasons, and for days, and years.” And then, at the end of this first creation narrative—for there are two in Genesis—the Creator rests and blesses one day a week to be set aside just for joy, just for rest, just to take satisfaction in all that is. You see, the Creator knew that you and I would forever be dividing up our lives into seasons,

and days, and years. Like Arctic explorers, planting flags in the snow so they don't get lost, you and I need events and occasions by which to measure out our life. Without the right tools in hand, we use the wrong ones. We run the risk of measuring out our days in terms of their accomplishments: our achievements, our productivity. We run the risk of seeing life through the eyes of how much money we make, or how much power we possess, or how many people we control. We're forever assessing ourselves, you and I, and we need mile-markers in time to give us a sense of perspective. Sometimes we plod through life like prisoners, scrawling out a tally of days on the prison walls, living from holiday to holiday, from vacation to vacation, living for those days when we don't feel tired, or stressed, or bored. But we were meant for something better. Long before you and I were working ourselves to death for our four weeks of vacation and our annual getaways to places like the Outer Banks, there was sabbath. And though well-meaning people often failed to understand the joy of sabbath—like the mother in the opening story—it has been keeping people sane and happy for three millennia. I'm not suggesting that we reinstate the old blue laws or that we forbid our children from giggling on Sundays. And yet, I am saying that there is wisdom in reclaiming for today the ancient practice of sabbath.

You've seen the old evolutionary cartoon that shows the four ancestors of humankind all walking in a row, each one taller and more erect than the one behind him, with a modern man strutting in the lead. I recently saw one such cartoon in which the neanderthal—the guy second in line—taps on the modern man's shoulder and says, “Don't call it evolution. The little guy in the back gets offended.” This story of creation is perhaps the most debated text in all the Bible. Some use it to deny science. Others point to it to demonstrate the absolute foolishness of faith. And yet, the first chapter of Genesis is a Hebrew poem. Poetry conveys more truth by way of aesthetic impulses and emotions than by way of literal fact and logic. It's not science, and if it's read like science, it will be misunderstood. And yet, it's interesting just how much scientific knowledge it echoes. It makes the oceans the mother of all life. It has the sea creatures being created first, then the crawling things, then the birds, then mammals, and humankind last of all. Some would point out that the original diet prescribed to humankind in Genesis—before the fall—is purely vegan, a little bit of wisdom that I'm struggling with myself. Of course, we know that the world took shape over many eons, not just six literal days. We know, too, that there's not water above the heavens. If we read Genesis for scientific insights, we'll be disappointed. But mostly, I'm impressed with its psychological wisdom.

Consider the psychology of sabbath. Senator Joe Lieberman is an observant Jew who wrote a book about sabbath-keeping—a book that was given to me by George Freas, entitled *The Gift of Rest*. In this book, Lieberman ponders the question of whether Jews have kept the sabbath for 3,000 years, or if the sabbath has kept the Jews for 3,000 years. Lieberman claims that sabbath is meant for “beautiful settings [perhaps like this one], soaring melodies, wonderful food and wine,” and for “sensual pleasures,” including—but not limited to—the first one that came to mind when you heard me say “sensual pleasures.” It's an ingenious notion, this idea that you would set aside just one day a week to put aside labor, to focus on the things that give you joy, to turn your heart toward your loved ones, to give them your undivided attention, to revel in the pleasures of the senses, the sights, the smells, the flavors, the sensations, and to turn to God in gratitude and prayer. We spend so much of our lives trying to prove ourselves, worshiping at the altar of that modern American trinity: achievement, attainment, and productivity. We must put aside time in our lives just to be.

To me, the most ingenious thing about the sabbath is the way Genesis links it to creation itself. A recent study claims that spending ten minutes or more outdoors each day makes a person more creative. It doesn't matter if you're walking your dog, weeding your garden, or just sitting out on the porch: exposing yourself to creation makes you creative. It's as if the very genius of the world outside us is contagious, but we have to allow ourselves to be exposed to it. Writers say that, in order to write well, you must read good writing. If you want to make the kind of music that speaks to the soul, you need to immerse yourself in that kind of music. If you want to create anything of beauty and worth, you must take the time to immerse yourself in those things as they've been created by others. The

sabbath command is that beauty, and truth, and goodness, that joy, and pleasure, and rest are just as important as anything else we pursue in life. We become healthier, happier people when we hold ourselves strictly accountable to a weekly sabbath—and the world so desperately needs healthy, happy people.

Sabbath makes us worthier stewards of God's creation. It's become popular in recent years to say that you and I are “co-creators” with God. I'm not willing to go that far. A man looked to the sky and said to God, “You know, we can create human beings without you.” God said, “Oh, show me.” The man reached for a handful of clay, and God said, “No, no. Get your own dirt.” I'm not willing to say that we're “co-creators” because we cannot produce life or matter. But Genesis links sabbath to creation because you and I are called to participate with God in keeping creation and making it good. Sabbath gives us the strength we need for the task.

Whenever you hear people express regrets about the way they've lived, it usually comes down to whether they kept the sabbath. Of course, most people don't use that kind of language, but they say it in other ways. “I wish I'd spent more time with my kids. I wish I'd told my wife how much she meant to me. I should have given more, done more for others, invested more in the joy of other living things. I should have spent more time in prayer.” What they're basically saying is, “I should have observed the sabbath in my life, should have lived for things other than achievements, attainments, and productivity.”

Now, I know what some of you are thinking. “I don't have a day each week for sabbath, and the day I do have is not a Sunday.” Well, Sundays are ideal for sabbath, but of course, it's a moveable feast; my own sabbath now falls on Mondays—or sometimes Wednesdays. The important thing is that you set aside a specific block of time, as close to a whole day as you can give it, that you're intentional about it, and consistent. The most important thing is that you draw an inviolable boundary around the time you can give it, and you declare, “This time is sabbath. In it, I will not work, and I will not fret about work. I will not dwell on all that I have to do tomorrow. This is sabbath, and in it I will play. I will pray. I will seek out the ones I love. I will pursue those things that give me joy. On this sabbath, I will be reminded that there is more to life than what I produce, that there is a whole world of life and love that deserves my attention.”

The sun and the moon, Genesis tells us, were made “for signs, and for seasons, and for days, and for years.” It's true. We all need some way to measure out our life, some way to gauge it, to get it into sync with the larger world. Practicing sabbath is not a grim duty or a selfish indulgence. Sabbath is how you participate with God in healing creation, starting with yourself. Amen.