

# SABBATH: PRAY AND PLAY

GOD IN MY EVERYTHING. KEN SHIGEMATSU. 2013 SEPTEMBER 15.



HEBREWS 4:9-11

Thanks, John and Lindsay and team, for leading us in worship this morning.

I don't know if you've ever felt completely gassed out. When I finished grad school seminary in Boston, my younger brother, cousin and I did a road trip from Montreal to Los Angeles, and one of the most memorable parts of that road trip was when we were going through Colorado and we decided that we were going to climb Mount Sneffels, one of Colorado's 14,000-foot-plus mountains.

So, we're climbing and we're hiking, and we get about two thirds of the way up when we come to a ridge. We then go into a valley and start climbing up again, and we're not sure if we're heading in the right direction or not; we don't have a map. We ask some more experienced mountaineers, "Are we actually ascending Mount Sneffels?" They reply, "No. You've come the wrong way. You've got to go back down the valley you came up and cross the ridge again. Then you're going to go to *that* peak, and you'll hopefully make the top."

I was feeling pretty discouraged not only because we had gone the wrong way but also because I was hiking that day with a cast on my leg! I had sustained a basketball injury; I twisted an ankle. I figured it was a good way to rehabilitate: no crutches but a cast. And so I was feeling pretty down!

But we continued our climb, and as we were getting close to the top, my brother took a photo of me and my cousin. This is my cousin over here. He's not a Sherpa; he's from Japan! People ask, "Is this the guy who carried your pack?" "No, he's my cousin." He's like a teenager there.

Amazingly, we did make it to the summit. We didn't stay for very long, and then we began our descent. Darkness came over us, and we hiked back to the car in the dark. We were totally famished, totally exhausted.

We got in the car and we were looking for the first restaurant or fast-food place around, and we ended up rolling into a Wendy's at around 12:30 a.m. (It was open 24 hours, thank God!) I'm driving and we come up to the speaker, and the woman through the speaker says, "Welcome to Wendy's! May I take your order?" I remember turning to my brother and saying, "Order." Now, my brother is a lucid guy, quite bright; he kind of shook himself out of his stupor and said, "Whopper." The woman said, "This is Wendy's." And my brother said, "Oh, I'm sorry." He was trying to regain consciousness and clarity, and he said, "Uh, soft tacos?" "This is Wendy's," she repeated, although she was very nice about it. And again my brother said, "Oh, I'm sorry." He focused and tried, "Big Mac?" Again, she said, "This is Wendy's." Finally, he simply said, "I'll have whatever you have!"

My brother, my cousin and I were truly spent that night in Colorado. We had our Wendy's, and then we pulled over to side of the freeway and just crashed that night.

I don't know if you've ever been that exhausted, but I'm sure that there have been times when you have felt really, really tired. Maybe you were facing a big deadline or grappling with some complex issue in a relationship or dealing with some kind of financial stress or a complicated matter at school or at work, and you were tired not just in your body but in your spirit as well.

We long for rest – rest not just physically but soulfully or spiritually as well.

In the book of Hebrews, the writer offers these words from God to us. As he or she (we don't know who the writer

is) writes, “There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; for anyone who enters God’s rest also rests from their works, just as God did from his. Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will perish by following their example of disobedience” (Hebrews 4:9-11\*).

In this passage, “their example” refers to the children of Israel in the desert under Moses as they were making their way toward the Promised Land.

Let’s pray together.

Living God,

We pray, as you urge us here in the book of Hebrews, that if we hear your voice – and we ask that we would – we wouldn’t harden our hearts but that we would respond and we would enter into the rest and into the abundant life that you so desire for us.

Help us to say yes to you and, in so doing, to say yes to your good and gracious plan for us.

It’s in the name of Jesus we pray.

Amen.

In this message, we’re going to look at how God has this rhythm where God rests one day in seven, as we see in the creation poem, and how, as people who are made in God’s image, we are also made to rest at least one day in seven. Then we’re going to see how entering into genuine Sabbath involves trusting God enough to pray and to play.

As you may know if you’ve read what’s often referred to as the Old Testament, in the Ten Commandments, which is listed in both Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5, the fourth of the Ten Commandments is the commandment to take a Sabbath day, which ideally is a 24-hour period of rest.

But here in what’s often called the New Testament, in Hebrews, the writer also calls us to enter into the Sabbath-rest that remains for the people of God. In Hebrews 4:4, the writer says, “For somewhere [God] has spoken about the seventh day in these words: ‘On the seventh day God rested from all his works.’” That “somewhere” would be Genesis 2:2. (In fairness to the writer of Hebrews, the chapter and verse divisions that we have in the Bible today weren’t present in his or her Bible; those divisions of chapter and verse were added actually in the sixteenth century.)

When the writer of Hebrews calls us to Sabbath-rest, he or she has in mind the fact, based on the context of this passage, that God in the creation poem worked for six days and then rested for one. The writer knows that we are made in God’s image, and so we are made to do the same and have at least one day of rest in every seven days.

Then the writer says, “There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God.” Biblical scholars point out that this invitation is a call for us to honour Sabbath *now* in our weekly rhythms, but it also suggests that there is a *future* Sabbath-rest for those who belong to God that we will one day enjoy in heaven. The writer is saying that in light of the fact that our God, at the beginning of creation, took one day of rest in seven, and in light of our future as people who will one day enjoy a rest with God forever in heaven, we are to therefore take one day of rest out of seven *now*.

By the way, this is one of the things that identifies us as the people of God. What’s the difference between you and

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\* Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are taken from The Holy Bible, *New International Version*®, NIV®.

just a nice Canadian? (And there are lots of very nice Canadians!) One of the things that identifies you as a daughter of God or as a son of God is that you honour the Sabbath day. It just makes you kind of peculiar, kind of different.

Sabbath is also an important part of our trellis. We introduced this concept last Sunday of our trellis that supports our life with God, much like a trellis supports a grapevine. The combination of spiritual practices that we choose, with the Spirit's leading, becomes our trellis – the support structure; our rhythm or rule of life – which helps us flourish in our friendship with Jesus, and the Sabbath is an important one of those spiritual practices.

If you've been around for a few years, you know that every once in a while, I'll come back to this theme of Sabbath. Here is why.

One of the reasons is that I tend to be a workaholic. If I didn't have this teaching in my life, I'd be working seven days a week – there's no question about it! I'm just wired that way. I don't know if it's because I'm Asian or Japanese or what! I don't know exactly where that comes from, and so I struggle with this.

It's also been a life-giving practice when I have honoured Sabbath. I've found, in my own life and in the lives of people around me, that even though they know it's in the Ten Commandments to take a Sabbath day, people often struggle with actually living this out. I've got a friend who wrote a fabulous book on the Sabbath; he recently read *God in My Everything* and he said, "You know, I had become so busy that I was not taking the Sabbath – and I wrote a book on the Sabbath! You've reminded me to re-embrace that gift."

How are we doing at honouring the Sabbath, honouring ourselves and honouring God? And the three are not mutually exclusive; they totally converge. As I said earlier, according to Hebrews 3 and 4, God works for six days and rests for one. We are made in God's image, so we are made to live with a rhythm of weekly rest. If we violate this rhythm, we damage ourselves and deprive those whom we love.

During the French Revolution, the French people decided that they would go to a ten-day workweek. Guess what happened? French people started getting sick. They started breaking down. They reverted back to a seven-day week where people work five or six days because we weren't designed to work a ten-day workweek.

When God calls us to honour the Sabbath, he does it – to use Polly Long's word – to "bliss" us; she used that word in her sermon this summer from the Psalms. God wants to "bliss" us with the Sabbath.

God rested one day in seven; our rhythm is just slightly different. The first human being in the creation poem was created on the sixth day of creation such that the very first full day for a human being on earth was the Sabbath, which means that we are designed to work from rest rather than to rest from work. That may sound like a very minor academic distinction, but here's the thing: When we understand that our life fundamentally *begins* with rest, we can affirm that our primary identity is not in what we do but in the fact that we are loved by God. When we begin with rest, we can affirm that we are primarily not human *doings* but human *beings*. I often feel – and I can only blame myself – more like a human doing than a human being.

When we begin with rest, we also have this posture of trusting God, and it is in trusting God that we honour God. Jade, a few moments ago, talked about the tithe, and if you're not yet a person who is sure that you are wanting to follow the ways of God, feel no pressure; we have so many people from so many different backgrounds here and everyone is welcome. But a tithe simply means to offer the first tenth of your income to God. It's another peculiar sign of the people of God, but there is a difference between offering the first tenth versus the last tenth, even though they may technically be the same amount. When we offer the first tenth, we are saying, "God, I give you my best. I regard everything – including my money – as belonging to you. I'm going to trust you. I want to trust

you enough that I'll have all that I need as opposed to waiting until we've realized what we have left over." It's honouring to God.

Some of us here (myself included) tend to feel that we need to earn our rest. But the fact is that not only did your ancient ancestors, Adam and Eve, begin their existence in rest, *you* began your existence at rest, too. In your mother's womb, you were at rest. Even if you had an ubermom, you weren't doing masterals in your mother's womb. You weren't practicing piano scales in your mother's womb, even if your mother was standing in front of a speaker playing Mozart or Bach, hoping that you'd become a great musician. You were still at rest. You began your existence at rest.

Moreover, you, from at least a Hebrew perspective, begin your *day* at rest. When does your day begin for you? You're probably morning people. You're here at the 9:15 service, so you're probably pretty early risers! But you probably regard your day as beginning when you wake in the morning, whenever that is, or maybe after you've had a cup of coffee or a shower. But from a Hebrew perspective, the day does not begin when you wake up in the morning but in the evening as you're getting ready to go to bed. From a Hebrew perspective, you begin your day sleeping – resting.

As Jade reminded us in his awesome sermon from Psalm 127, which you can download and stream from our website— I hope you do that. It was sometime in the month of July; Psalm 127 by Jade Holownia. Jade reminded us from Psalm 127 that while we are sleeping, God provides for us. He mentioned that the Psalm was written by Solomon, and Solomon received his greatest gift, his gift of wisdom, when? While he was sleeping. He mentioned that Adam received his greatest gift, Eve, while he was sleeping. And while *you* are sleeping, God is providing for you. Thus, you can know not only that your life began at rest but also that your day begins at rest, too.

Then God calls us to begin our *week* in rest as well – and this requires some trust. It says in our text, in verse 11, that we are to “[make every effort](#)” to enter that Sabbath-rest into which God calls us “[so that no one will perish by following their example of disobedience](#).” The fact is that leaning into God – trusting God – takes some effort.

When the writer says “[rest, so that \[you won't\] perish by following their example of disobedience](#),” as I briefly alluded to earlier on, the writer is referring to a time about 1,500 years before he or she was writing this, when God was leading the Israelites (also known as the Hebrews), under the leadership of Moses, through the wilderness and through the desert of Mount Sinai into the land of Canaan, the Promised Land, which symbolized rest. God, even before he gave his people the Ten Commandments, with that fourth commandment to take a Sabbath-rest, was training – it says, “testing” in Hebrews 3 – his people in the wilderness to really trust him.

One of the ways that God trained his people to trust him in the wilderness was by daily providing them with this honey-flavoured wafer called manna. Manna simply means, “What is it?” – because when they picked it up, they said, “What is this? What is this?”

God said, “I'm going to provide this manna for you every day, so you don't need to get more than a day's supply; just get a day's supply and trust that I'll provide you with manna day by day.” But some people went into the desert, and as they were looking for manna, they thought they were at Costco: They were loading up with their shopping carts even after they'd had their fill for the day. And so when they woke up the next morning, they saw that the supply they had gotten the day before was rotting, filled with maggots. They weren't trusting God.

Then God said, “Here's the thing: On the eve of the Sabbath” – the Sabbath precedes the Ten Commandments – “I want you to take enough for two days' worth of food, and it won't rot.” And miraculously, the manna, the wafers, did not rot. On the second day – the Sabbath day – God was calling people to rest and not go fishing for manna.

But, as you guessed it, some of the Israelites were anxious about getting more, so on the Sabbath day, even though they'd had enough, they were looking for more manna. This whole feeding process was really not only a provision of food but also a way for God to train his people to trust him.

Going into the Promised Land, the land of Canaan, was also an exercise of trust. They're standing on the banks of the River Jordan, and God is saying, "I'm going to give you this very fertile land, flowing with milk and honey. I'm going to provide it for you. Trust me." And the Israelites said, "No, no, no. We need to do a feasibility study. We need to do a SWOT analysis." Strengths, weaknesses— What do the "OT" of SWOT stand for? I forget. *[Somebody from the congregation calls out a response.]* "Opportunities and threats." Good! That's perfect! Opportunities – well, there are some opportunities. But the threats – thank you, Kirk – are far greater: "These guys look like they're WWF wrestlers!" they thought. "There's no way we can take these guys on!" And so they did not enter the Promised Land when God wanted them to because they had failed to trust God.

Here's the thing: How does this relate to Sabbath? Sabbath is also an exercise in trusting God. It really is.

I felt convicted to honour God's Word by taking a 24-hour Sabbath when I was in grad school, in seminary, and I got to thinking, "I've got exams on Monday mornings on a regular basis in Greek and Hebrew." I'm not very good at languages, so I decided that I would take my Sabbath, my 24-hour period of rest, from Saturday dinner time to Sunday dinner time. And there were times when, come Sunday afternoon, I had a couple of big exams on Monday and I would be anxious. I wanted to study, but it gave me an opportunity to simply lift up my anxiety to God and say, "I'm just going to trust you here."

If you're a student, you take a 24-hour Sabbath and it's going to be stressful sometimes, but it will give you an opportunity to really put your faith into practice, literally, by trusting God. If you're working and you've got a big presentation coming up or you've got a deadline and your Sabbath day rolls around, there's going to be a part of you that wants to work on the project, but this will be an opportunity for you to trust God. Lift up your anxiety to God and say, "I'm just going to go with it. I'm going to trust you." That's real faith. That's real faith.

And if you honour God, as the Scripture says, God will honour you. Honour God and God will honour you.

I was speaking in Chicago on the subject of Sabbath recently, and there was someone in the audience from the military, an undergraduate student, who said— He seemed like a very disciplined guy; he said, "If I'm going to take a Sabbath – and I feel called by Scripture to do that and to take 24 hours away from study – then I'm going to have to plan. I'm going to have to focus more on my studies the other six days."

The writer of Hebrews says "[make every effort](#)" to enter into Sabbath-rest. Sabbath takes effort in the sense of trusting God, but it also takes some planning. It really does.

Now, I'm going to throw something out, and I'm not certain exactly of the answer, but I think that if you are a stay-at-home dad or a mother with young children, Sabbath is really challenging. It may not be a complete day of rest for you; it may simply be a simpler day or a day with relatively less work – I think that's just trying to be realistic here.

I remember from this past week one of the mothers in our community saying to me that, for her, raising a couple of young kids meant that she would not put her kids in any organized sports or activities on her Sabbath because it just felt like too much rushing around. And on the Sabbath day, she would simply make grilled cheese sandwiches or have leftovers and they'd go out to the park or to the soccer field and just hang out with other families. It just meant simplifying her day.

A few years ago, when I was talking on Sabbath, I just threw out the question, "How do families with young kids

honour Sabbath?” While I was just kind of asking that question rhetorically, someone from this section shouted out, “No grocery shopping! Take out!” For her, it meant taking out food. Understandably, a lot of people see cooking as work.

I don’t have all the answers here, so if you have ideas in terms of how parents (especially mothers) with young children can honour Sabbath by simplifying life and decreasing work, please either email me with your ideas or tweet me @KenShigematsu. Or go to our Facebook page at [Facebook.com/GodInMyEverything](https://www.facebook.com/GodInMyEverything) and share your stories. Let’s share our wisdom here.

If we are to honour the 24-hour Sabbath, if we are to move in that direction, what’s it going to look like? Well, very simply put, Sabbath is a day to pray and to play. It sounds really simple. It’s not that simple though.

You know the name Rod Wilson? Rod Wilson is the president of Regent College, which is a theological school on the campus of the University of British Columbia.

A number of years ago, he was leading the community through a major fundraising project so that they could build a new library (among other things), and at the end of that successful campaign, his board said, “Rod, we finished the campaign. You need to take a vacation.” So Rod and his wife Bev took a vacation to Wales. Rod noted that this was his first Sabbath in recent memory. He decided to unplug from the computer; no email, no cellphone, no car. They were in a tiny town of 1,500 people. They were eating; they were sleeping a lot; they were drinking coffee and going into these little bookstores – they love stuff like that. Remember, he’s the president of a college, so he loves books!

Rod was anticipating that it would be a great vacation – a great Sabbath – but here’s what Rod said: “When I was in Wales, I experienced significant withdrawal pains, both psychologically and physically.” He said, “I yearn for work and for production and was troubled by the fact that I had nothing I had to do. For me, it was a significant crisis.” He said, “Oh, I wanna work! Oh, but it’s Sabbath.”

Eventually, he was able to enjoy his Sabbath, and when he got back here to Vancouver, he vowed that he would have a rhythm, much like God’s, where he would have 24 hours where he would unplug from email, computer, cellphone – anything related to work – and spend time worshipping in community with his family or friends or working in the garden, which apparently he enjoys doing.

Eugene Peterson, a pastor for whom I have immense respect, defines Sabbath as:

Uncluttered time and space to distance ourselves from the frenzy of our own activities so we can see what God has been and is doing. If we do not regularly quit work for one day a week we take ourselves far too seriously. The moral sweat pouring off our brows blinds us to the primal action of God in and around us.

Boy, that’s so good! If we are just working seven days a week, we’ll tend to take ourselves too seriously and the sweat – “the moral sweat” – pouring off of our foreheads into our eyeballs will blind us to the work of God around us.

Part of what we’re called to do on Sabbath is to remember the great things that God has done for us.

As the writer of the Hebrews calls the people of God to Sabbath, he’s reminding them of how God delivered them through the desert, first under Moses and then under Joshua, into the Promised Land – and they give thanks for that. Later in Hebrews, the writer reminds us of how God has led us into a far greater Promised Land through *another* Joshua: “Joshua” can also be translated “Jesus.” Through Jesus and his sacrificial death on the cross for our sins, we can have our sins forgiven and be at peace and at rest with God, now and forever. Sabbath is the time

where we pause to remember what God has done.

Not long ago, on a Sabbath day, I took time to journal, and the heading of the journal entry was “The Surprising Unplanned Gifts of God in My Life.” I went over my life and some of its major turning points, like moving from Tokyo to London, England, when I was two and then to Vancouver. And being busted— I’m not going to go over detail of my life with you; I don’t want to bore you! But being busted, when I was a teenager, for stealing and how that opened me up to consider a new way of life and how my dad then took me to a youth conference where I heard how I could have a new beginning with God because Jesus had died on the cross for our sins.

I went through the major events of my life, and this is what I concluded: The major turning points of my life were not things I initiated; they were gifts from God.

Have you ever done that with your life? Look back and— You’ve got your journal here [*addressing somebody in the congregation*]. I don’t know if you’ve ever looked back over your life and considered the major turning points. Maybe some of them you initiated, but I bet that a lot of them, as you look back, were just doors that God opened, gifts that God gave you. And when you realize that, there’s something about that knowledge that makes you want to kneel and worship Jesus, that realization that you and I didn’t pull ourselves up by our bootstraps but that we are what we are and we’re becoming what we’re becoming by the grace of God.

The reason that we pause here weekly and do Life Together is to stop working for a moment and wipe the sweat from out of our eyes so that we can see how God *was* at work in our lives, how God *is* at work in our lives – and that will lead us to worship. It will lead us to praise. And that, in turn, will lead to rest.

Sometime this week, I was meeting with a surgeon and a nurse in our community, and they were telling me, “When we’re with someone who’s dying who has no faith, they’re just struggling to stay alive because this life, as far as they’re concerned, is it. But when we’re with someone who’s dying who really knows God, they’re at rest and they’re at peace.” When you know that your life is in God’s hands, then in dying and in living, you can know Sabbath.

Sabbath is the day to pause and to pray and to worship and to recognize that our life is in God’s hands.

It’s also a day to play. To play.

My friend Mark Buchanan says it best. I’ve quoted him before and I’ll quote him again because he’s such a poetic writer. He says Sabbath is the day to “[c]ease from what is necessary” and to “[e]mbrace that which gives life.” He writes, “Sabbath ... is a reprieve from what you ought to do, even though the list of oughts is infinitely long and never done.”

We know about that. He goes on:

Sabbath is the day you trade places with them [those oughts]: they go into the salt mine and you go out dancing. ... You get to willfully ignore the many niggling things your existence genuinely depends on – and is often hobbled beneath – so that you can turn to whatever you’ve put off and pushed away for lack of time, lack of room, lack of breath. You get to shuck the have-tos and lay hold of the get-tos.

What is that for you? What’s a “get-to” that you don’t get to during the rest of the week because you’ve got so many things to do? Is there something that you can get to do on your Sabbath day that feels life-giving for you?

For some of us, it may be running or going to exercise class; it might be novel, a film, eating sumptuous food, being with loved ones. What is that for you?



And here's the thing: When you are delighting in something, God is delighting in you because God, like the perfect, unimaginably loving parent, delights in your delight and takes joy in your joy.

Here is a picture from the summer. This is Joey. I'm not sure if you can see him, but he's running on the beach trying to outrun the waves; he's having such a good time. My wife Sakiko took this picture. As you know, when your child or your loved one is experiencing joy, you just want to burst with joy as well – and so it is with God. When you are having a good time, God is having a good time, too.

As I mentioned last week, as you create your trellis, your rhythm of life, I hope that there will be a practice in your rhythm that draws you to God, one that nourishes you and one – keep it real simple – that connects you with other people, in relationship or in service.

Ideally, our Sabbath looks that way too: There is a connection to God; something that nourishes us; and something that connects us to others.

As we honour the Sabbath, as we trust God enough to pray and to pause, to pray and to play, it might come as a shock to our system, as it did initially for Rod Wilson. But we will discover the freedom of knowing that our life isn't upheld by the sweat of our brow alone. It's not upheld by the sweat of our brow but by the grace of manna – bread from heaven – falling all around us. And as we begin our days and our weeks this way, we'll become people who know God in our everything.

Let's pray.

Is there an invitation here? The Spirit says, in Hebrews, “[Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts](#)” (Hebrews 3:15). Is there an invitation to Sabbath? to experience it yourself? to maybe support someone else – perhaps a family member – in Sabbath? Embrace that invitation. Because like all of God's invitations, it will lead to life: life now and life forevermore.

*[silence]*

And we pray these things in the name Jesus, the one who has given the ultimate rest.

Amen.

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## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- In what sense does entering into Sabbath require effort?
- What is the difference between a day off and a true Sabbath?

## RECOMMENDED READING

Buchanan, Mark. *The Rest of God: Restoring Your Soul by Restoring Sabbath*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2006.

Shigematsu, Ken. “Sabbath: Oasis for Body and Soul.” *God in My Everything*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013.

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- MLA Shigematsu, Ken. "Sabbath: Pray and Play." *God in My Everything* Sermon Series. Tenth Church. Vancouver. 15 Sept. 2013. *Tenth.ca*. Web. [D Mon. YYYY]. Transcript.
- TURABIAN Shigematsu, Ken. "Sabbath: Pray and Play" (Transcript). Sermon, Tenth Church, Vancouver, September 15, 2013, [URL] (accessed [Month D, YYYY]).