

What is Sabbath? And, why are we being asked to focus on Sabbath this day?

We know in our bodies and souls that we have a need for rest, but sabbath rest, as portrayed in the Bible, is not really like any other kind of rest; it is not simply a break to gain strength for doing more work. Abraham Joshua Heschel writes this of the sabbath, “to the Biblical mind . . . labour is a means toward an end, and the day of sabbath as a day of rest, as a day of abstaining from toil, is not for the purpose of recovering one’s lost strength and becoming fit for the forthcoming labour. The sabbath is a day for the sake of life.” Heschel adds, “six days a week we wrestle with the world, wringing profit from the earth; on the Sabbath we especially care for the seed of eternity planted in the soul.”

Who are human beings that we have as Heschel writes “a seed of eternity planted in the soul?” Here Heschel’s words reflect the beautiful words of Psalm 139 “It was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother’s womb; even before a word is on my tongue, you Lord, know it completely”. We are made by God, known fully to God and our purpose on earth is to seek God, to love God, to have our hearts softened by God. This is the reason for the Sabbath, to be remind that we find our ultimate purpose in God.

This has been a hard year for everyone – employees and volunteers of the Church as well. Our leaders in the Synod Office decided it would be a good moment for everyone to draw in a deep breath and focus on resting rather than producing. You can also find here, the letter from our Diocesan Administrator, the Very Reverend M. Ansley Tucker.

Is there a relationship between the Sabbath and Justice?

The Sabbath is also the heart of the Biblical understanding of justice, because justice proceeds from the understanding that we are created by God - as are our neighbors, strangers, enemies and indeed all the earth.

This is how the Sabbath is first presented in Exodus:

“Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. 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, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.”

The landowner, the slave, the livestock the strangers living in the community – all are to rest. Why? Because all have a greater purpose than labour. Why? Because every being’s primary purpose is in being, not just in doing. The great offense of the enslavement of the Israelites in Egypt was not simply that they were enslaved, but that they were forced to be commodities in the grand Egyptian system of production; their whole selves were shackled by the constant demand to produce.

Walter Brueggemann who is a wonderful scholar of the Hebrew Scriptures or Old Testament wrote an intriguing book title *Sabbath as Resistance: Saying No to the Culture of Now*. He explains it this way: ““The Sabbath rest of God is the acknowledgment that God and God’s people in the world are not commodities to be dispatched for endless production [God’s people are not] “hands” in the service of a command economy. Rather they are subjects situated in an economy of neighborliness. All of that is implicit in the reality and exhibit of divine rest.”

The Sabbath is not a pause to enable further productivity, it is a weekly reminder that the kingdom of God is continually breaking into the world in which we live. As Brueggemann writes, “Sabbath is not simply the pause that refreshes, it is the pause that transforms.” For in the Sabbath pause all are made equal, there is no distinction between rich or poor, slave or free, citizen or immigrant, even the beasts of burden are to be given rest on the Sabbath. But the heart of Sabbath rest is care, tenderness and compassion; it is not simply a time to refrain from performing certain tasks, but rather a time to be reminded of our purpose.

Wait, doesn’t Jesus heal on the Sabbath?

In healing on the Sabbath Jesus is not opposing the practice of ‘honouring the Sabbath’, but he is, as he does throughout his ministry, objecting to the ways the religious leaders are using the Sabbath law to further oppress rather than liberate people. Jesus, as he did when his ministry began, evokes the prophet Isaiah who confronts the rich and powerful for trampling the Sabbath and “using it for their own interests,” and who rails at them for taking pains to present publicly an image of piety and humility on their fast day while oppressing their workers. “Is not this the fast that I choose?” God says through Isaiah, “to lose the bonds of injustice.”

God first initiates Sabbath rest to reflect God’s own rest as a part of the work of creation, but Sabbath is also intimately connected to the Exodus, the journey of God’s people from slavery in Egypt to freedom in the promised land. “Remember that you were slaves in Egypt, but the Lord God, with a mighty hand, brought you up out of Egypt; therefore the Lord your God commands you to keep the Sabbath.” Jesus does not object to the Sabbath; rather, he objects to the keeping of the Sabbath being separated from God’s ongoing work of liberation. It has become a rule that binds, instead of a practice that frees. People have forgotten that it’s rooted in this story of liberation, a story that God is still writing.

How can one practice Sabbath?

There are many ways for practicing Sabbath. In my own family we have a Sabbath practice on Saturdays. We refrain from screens, purchasing, and working and take time to focus on connection and rest. We play games, converse, tend our home, walk and do only things that feel restful and that invite connection and relationship. At times it’s not easy – what about all those things I SHOULD be doing? In time though, we’ve come to find that it is healing, renewing and transforming.

We begin with an Opening Ritual and end with a Closing Ritual which you can find below.

Blessings of Sabbath rest to you!