

## SERMON: “Keeping Sabbath”

First United Church, Waterloo – Sunday, September 5, 2021

*PRAYER: “Blesséd art Thou, our God, Ruler of the Universe, who hast sanctified us by Thy commandments and commanded us to kindle Sabbath lights. May the Sabbath light that illumines our spaces and places cause peace and contentment to shine in our lives. Bless us, O God, through Sabbath-time, and cause Thy divine glory to shine upon us. Enlighten our darkness and guide us and all humankind, your children, towards truth and eternal light. Amen”* [adapted from a traditional home service for Sabbath eve]

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*“Observe the Sabbath day, and keep it holy, as your God has commanded you.” (Deut. 5:12)*

Today, I want to explore what it might mean for people of Christian faith to keep Sabbath, to open ourselves to the experience of the gift of setting aside holy time.

There’s something appropriate about that during a weekend that celebrate human labour.

We may know of or have Jewish friends and neighbours

who hold fast to that ritual practice from sundown on Friday to sundown on Saturday.

For a number of Christians, perhaps some of us, that timeline stretches over Sunday instead as a celebration of resurrection promise and hope for newness of life.

Weekly life in ancient Israel had its stressors,

but it was not quite like the frenetic stressors of life in our contemporary culture and world.

A lot of today’s labourers have working hours that consume time over the weekend.

For people of faith, and even those of no faith, caught up in that kind of treadmill of busy-ness keeping Sabbath on a day of the week other than Saturday or Sunday is highly recommended.

And yes, while there is sense of obligation about, and a discipline of practice involved,

the commandment to keep Sabbath was never intended to be a legalistic burden,

nor an imposition of cheerless and tedious strictures.

As ancient Israel’s psalmists sang about it:

*“Blesséd is the one ... whose delight is in the law of God,*

*who meditates on that law day and night.” (Psalm 1:1a, 2; see also Ps. 19:7-10; Ps. 119:14-16)*

Sabbath-keeping is rooted in ceasing to make space for a day of holy time

since the noun Sabbath is derived from the Hebrew verb “*shabbat*” meaning to cease or desist.

It was originally given as a spiritual practice to ancient Israel

as one of their ways of sustaining their covenant relationship with God.

That God was honoured as one who made heaven and earth in “six days”

and abstained from work on the “seventh day” and rested (Exodus 31:16-17)

Hebrew scholars usually translate that phrase as “God ceased and was refreshed”.

The Creation story ending at Genesis 2:2 literally translates as “God ceased”.

Sabbath-keeping, setting aside a day for holy time, for ceasing and being refreshed

as a practice of faith has personal value, counter-cultural impact,

and offers abiding inter-personal blessing.

## PERSONAL VALUE

Keeping sabbath time one day a week enhances personal health and spiritual growth. For Wayne, an ad agency writer, observing sabbath became a personal spiritual practice in his thirties both as a means of honouring his commitment to God and as plain common sense. He's in his forties now and still holding to it. Sundays are his chosen Sabbath days. He avoids doing anything related to his job. He goes to church, spends time with his family, does some yard work or runs some errands on occasion, or does pretty much nothing. When he slips into doing some work hoping to get a jump on the week ahead, it backfires. The following week gets difficult and frenzied and feels like getting chronically behind. *"It's weird,"* he notes, *"but I think I can guess why this happens. First, God knows me better than I know myself. God made the sabbath for me. When I live the way God tells me to, I'm simply operating in the most optimal, efficient way. The day of rest gives me more energy, focus, and ability. If you change your oil according to the manufacturer's specs, your car works better."* By keeping sabbath, Wayne has found that God makes a number of things happen, perhaps thousands of small, barely detectable ones, that help him come out ahead. <sup>1</sup> Lynne Baab, a writer and teacher in Seattle, wrote a book on sabbath-keeping based on interviews with people like Wayne. She found that the day one chooses doesn't matter, but consistency does. *"The rhythm of work and rest seems to help us function more purposefully and energetically, living in responsive obedience to the pattern God designed for us."* <sup>2</sup> Rumour has it that the Ontario premier is considering ways of implementing a four-day work week. That would free up some time for working folks to enjoy a sabbath. It's about a one-day break from one's usual routines, responsibilities, patterns. It's an encouragement to students to take a full day away from schoolwork and study. It's an invitation to stay-at-home parents to leave off house-keeping for a day and play, and enjoy being family together. What might it mean for retirees to set aside holy time off from all the other things that preoccupy their time? to play and just delight in God and life? What daily patterns can be set aside so time with God, inter-actions with others, and self-care practices can become a one-day sabbath for residents in long-term care facilities? What is even possible for people involved in 24/7 care-giving? Might they be encouraged at least to enjoy some mini-sabbaths during each week? to have conversations, negotiations with loved ones for times of substitute respite care? *"Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy"*. There is great personal benefit in a weekly day of ceasing, so we can find refreshment.

## COUNTER-CULTURAL IMPACT

It's worth noting that in its original historical context, the command to keep Sabbath was given to Hebrew wanderers freed from slavery in Egypt.

A God who declares, "*You shall have no other gods before me*", and who prohibits the creation and worship of "*graven images*"

is not just a religious figure, but One whose authority and concern is attentive to socio-economic policies and practices played out in human community.

Such a God who asks for regular restfulness in the midst of persistent busy-ness is on a collision course with any "Egypt" like system and its other gods that are focused on insatiable productivity and consumption.

It's hard to imagine that in those realms of ancient Egypt ruled by Pharaohs there would be any such thing as sabbath rest for anyone.

Not for Pharaoh who constantly monitored production schedules;

not for any of Pharaoh's supervisors or taskmasters who have make sure quotas are met, nor for the non-Egyptian slaves who do all the relentless grudge work,

nor for the "gods of Egypt" who are called upon to legitimate the glory of it all.

So it is in any system of empire dedicated to commodities, achievement, and consumption.

Jesus was very aware of the difference between life lived with God as Sovereign and life experienced and lived under other powers and authorities.

When, in Matthew's gospel, he issues the invitation

*"Come to me, all who labour and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.*

*Take my yoke upon you and learn from me ...*

*for my yoke is easy and my burden is light"* (Matthew 11:28-30)

He is highlighting the distinct difference between a life lived in committed relationship with God and life under the heavy yoke

of both Roman imperial taxation in support of military expansionism, and the stringent requirements that were imposed on Jewish citizens by the prevailing religious establishment.

The sabbath rest of God is in the heart of covenant relationship

where people are acknowledged and valued as subjects

in an emerging social structure of supportive neighbourliness,

and not treated as commodities used to uphold relentless production and consumption.

The ever-insightful and profound American biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann writes:

*"In our own contemporary context of the rat race of anxiety,*

*the celebration of Sabbath is both an act of resistance and alternative...*

*it is a visible resistance that our lives are not defined*

*by the production and consumption of commodity goods.*

*Such an act of resistance requires enormous intentionality and communal reinforcement*

*amid the barrage of seductive pressures from the insatiable insistences of the market,*

*with its intrusion into every part of our life...."* 3

He asserts it is also an alternative to the demanding, chattering, pervasive presence of advertising in support of "other gods" who seek to devour all of our "rest time".

*“The alternative on offer is the awareness and practice of the claim that we are situated on the receiving end of the gifts of God.” 4*

Is it any wonder that as soon as those ancient Hebrew slaves passed through the waters into their life of freedom from Pharaoh’s yoke, Miriam led them in dance!!

## INTER-PERSONAL

In addition to personal benefit and a witness of social resistance, keeping sabbath time opens up endless opportunities for delighting in and enhancing our inter-relationships: our inter-relationship with God, our inter-relationships with family and friends, with other people of faith, with neighbours, and strangers, and with creation.

Take courage and inspiration from American theologian Marva J. Dawn, who while recently retired, sadly died, this past April.

In her book “Keeping the Sabbath Wholly”, she wrote: (Note 5)

*“This is what we celebrate on a Sabbath day. We join the generations of believers who set aside a day to remember that we are all precious and honoured in God’s sight and loved, profoundly loved, not because of what we produce.*

*To celebrate God’s love on our Sabbaths also transforms us so that we can more deeply value others in the same way.*

*When we are not under compulsion to be productive, we are given time to dwell with others, to **be** with them and thereby discover who they are.”*

Setting aside sabbath time as an opportunity to enhance and enjoy inter-relationships frees us to choose perhaps to play, perhaps to engage in conversations that matter, perhaps to share a gentle time of affection and closeness, perhaps to just be present with and to one another, and or nature.

## CONCLUSION

Wow, I don’t know about all of you, but I know I need to get better at keeping Sabbath. What great value there is for us personally, for creating an alternative way of living in society, for enhancing our relationships with God, others, and creation.

Maybe you’re already into it. Feel free to share your experience with the rest of us.

Imagine a day a week sometime freed from working, from a sense of responsibility, free from checking our watches, our cellphones, our emails, from computer Zoom meetings, free from feeling compelled to produce, consume,

freed from any inclination to be greedy, or do violence,

freed from coveting our neighbour’s anything.

freed for rejuvenating rest, for play, for deeper connection with God,

freed for pondering the deeper questions of life like what purpose does God have for my life?

what are my deepest longings and feelings? or, where do I need to make improvements?

for being with others we care about, for maybe making new friends,

freed to enjoy the gift of life, and the abiding reality of being a beloved child of God.

And that's sheer gift, that's finding ourselves awash in grace.

Lynne Baab writes:

*"The sabbath teaches us grace because it connects us experientially to the basic truth that nothing we do will earn God's love.*

*As long as we are working hard, using our gifts to serve others, experiencing joy in our work along with the toil,*

*we are always in danger of believing that our actions trigger God's love for us.*

*Only in stopping, really stopping, do we teach our hearts and souls that we are loved apart from what we do."* 6

Ceasing, pausing, so we can rest and be refreshed and delight in life abundant with God.

Sounds more than wonderful to me, sounds healthful and healing and full of promise.

I'm keen to begin to dive into this practice more steadily, how about you?

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#### Notes

1 in Lynne Baab, *Sabbath Keeping*, (Intervarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL: 2006) in Chapter One on Sabbath Practices.

2 *Ibid.*, Chapter One, page 28 perhaps?

3 Walter Brueggeman, *Sabbath as Resistance: Saying No to the Culture of Now*, (revised edition, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY: 2017), In Chapter One on "Sabbath and the First Commandment".

4 *Ibid.*

5 Marva J. Dawn, *Keeping the Sabbath Wholly*, (2003 reprint, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, MI), in Chapter Two middle, "Ceasing Productivity and Accomplishment"

6 Lynne Baab, *op. cit.*, in Chapter One, subtitle "The Sabbath and Grace".