

19.3.17

“Sabbath as Resistance to Anxiety”

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Exodus 20:12-17

It’s a Friday afternoon, in cubicle, in an office park... somewhere in corporate America. <sup>1</sup> Peter Gibbons, is shutting down his computer, while holding the phone to his ear with his left hand, and shuffling files with his right. He checks his watch. Almost time. He looks around. Sees his boss, he ducks. Peter knows, though the audience hears only later The office lost some people this week, and needs to play catch up. Profits are down, so Corporate has decided to do layoffs, Who’s going to do the work? Everyone else. Fewer people, more to do. So... the boss, Bill Lumberg, lumbers around - looking for someone one whom he can transfer his “managerial anxiety” to make deadlines and budget. You can tell, Peter already knows that he’s the one, Bill is going to pick...the one going to be asked to work *on Saturday*. But still, our valiant hero races...Races to get out as fast as he can...he hangs up on his neighbor, Milton, in the next cubicle, jams his files in folders, smashes his mouse repeatedly to save files and close out of programs. It finally... shuts.... down... He turns and...

*“Hello Peter, What’s happening?”*

*I’m going to need you to come in tomorrow... mmh-yeah...*

*Oh and I almost forgot,*

*I’m also going to need you to come in on Sunday, too.*

*We a lost some people this week and uh,*

*we need to sorta play catch up... Thanks!”*

Have you ever felt that feeling? That moment, when you see all your precious weekend free-time disappear like smoke in the wind. You feel powerless. Angry. Depressed... Anxious.

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<sup>1</sup> “Office Space” - <https://youtu.be/dDseexwqm5U>

It's an all-too-common experience, to watch the powerful, shift their anxiety (financial or otherwise) onto those who are less powerful. You probably never thought of it this way, but that's the story of Pharaoh. Do you remember that story from the very end of Genesis from Sunday School? Or more likely, can you recall the Donny Osmond production of Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat? Do you remember Pharaoh's dreams? Or, rather, nightmares? How he saw in his dream, seven fat cows by the Nile, and then seven skinny cows, who eat the others. He was so disturbed by the nightmares that, on the advice of his steward, he plucked a Hebrew slave from the jail, and asked him to interpret the dreams. With the help of God, Joseph interpreted the dreams and forecasted seven years of plenty, followed by seven years of famine. It's a prophecy of woe, followed with a message of hope. There is a way to weather the anxious "days ahead," Joseph suggests - build storehouses, and appoint managers to ration the grain - well you know the rest of the story.

It all happens as Joseph says...and he helps Pharaoh ration through the famine...and Egypt builds its wealth throughout the times of challenge... Joseph even brings his family to live with him in the land of Goshen. And it all ends happily ever after... right? Well, not exactly... You see, the problem with building storehouses is that once those storehouses are built, they always want filling... and once managers are appointed, they want job security...over generation after generation, a system grows, and with it - the economic inequality between people.

And what we find by the end of the story, is that the Pharaoh has reduced the Hebrew people from service to slavery. And the building campaigns go on, and more bricks are required, and the quotas increase, and "productivity" becomes the name of the game. By the end, it says, Pharaoh treated the Hebrew people harshly, telling them to "*make bricks without straw.*" So God sends a deliverer - Moses - to tell Pharaoh - "*Let my people go!*" And after much struggle, and sacrifice, they escape the system.

And they leave behind the land of Egypt, and the Pharaoh, and follow God into the wilderness... all the way to Mount Sinai. And they send Moses high atop

the mountain to speak with the self-defining “*I am who I am*” God - YHWH - the Living God. And Moses comes back down, bringing back arms laden with stone tablets - Ten Words - what we know as the Ten Commandments. We began looking at them last week, and today we continue our study. What they really are is a new contract between this group of people - and their sovereign. For the people - this is a moment of regime change. This is the first indication that things are going to be different.

And yet, hidden in this new contract - there is a silent presence - Pharaoh. And at every word Moses compares and contrasts YHWH to Pharaoh, juxtaposing the Living God, to one who thinks of himself as a living god. Permit me to quote Walter Bruggeman at length now... He writes, there...

*“They remember that Pharaoh was regarded and considered himself, as a god, an absolute authority.*

*They remember that Egypt’s socioeconomic power was organized like a pyramid, with a workforce producing wealth, all of which flowed upward to the power elite and eventually to Pharaoh who sat atop that pyramid.*

*They remember that even though he had absolute power, and occupied the pinnacle of power, the Pharaoh was an endlessly anxious presence who cause the entire social environment to be permeated with a restless anxiety that had no limit or termination.*

*They remember, that even though Pharaoh, and all around it, he had nightmares of anxiety, dreamed of famine, and worried (Gen. 41:15-32).*

*They remember how that nightmare of scarcity, which contradicted the wealth and power of Pharaoh, led to rapacious state policies of monopoly that cause the crown to usurp the money, the cattle, the land, and finally the bodies of vulnerable peasants (47:13-26).*

*They remember that such exploitative policies eventually reduce the peasants to state slaves, who were kept busy building granaries to store the vast food supplies of the state monopoly.*

*They remember the frantic policies of Pharaoh, based on anxiety about food production, would lead to heavy-handed misery and the need to keep working and keep producing in order to meet insatiable imperial quotas were without end.*

*They remember **all of that** when the God of Sinai announced God's self as the one "who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery."*

Through Moses - and the Ten Commandments - YHWH is offering them a "New Deal." And the people, well, they are so ready to accept this new covenant, so eager, you know what they do? They say yes before they even hear the terms! They know anything will be better than life under Pharaoh. So they say with one voice, "Everything that the Lord has spoken, we will do." (Exodus 19:8). Like signing yes on the user agreement without even reading it...

But we should read it! For, God begins the contract by saying, "*I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God...* Just as the Pharaoh would have demanded a "loyalty pledge," would have demanded to have absolute authority without rival, *God's first claim is to **exclusiveness. Like Pharaoh** - the first requirement is for complete and total allegiance. That's a similarity between God and Pharaoh. That sounds like every edict of Pharaoh that's ever been recorded.*

But it's what comes next that is *so different*. Whereas most kingly edicts are about one's responsibilities to the monarch - the great majority of the Commandments are about our *responsibilities to our neighbor*. In Exodus 20:12-17, God speaks six times about **neighbor**. *Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land... You shall not murder, commit adultery, steal, bear false witness against your **neighbor**, you shall not covet your **neighbor's** house, wife, male or female slave, ox, donkey, anything that belongs to your **neighbor**.*

You wouldn't read anything like that in the decrees of Pharaoh, because this document is concerned with neighbors, and "the social calculus - and dares to imagine the maintenance of a neighborly community. It was not so in Egypt. There were no neighbors in that system; only threats and competitors."<sup>2</sup> It reminds me of so many suburban neighborhoods where the only time we see our neighbors is waving from our cars, as we each drive into our garage and close the door.

Here is the great contrast between YHWH and Pharaoh. Pharaoh doesn't care about how we treat each other; but YHWH does - and, in fact, YHWH cares about the *most vulnerable*.

But how are you to care for the neighbor when you've, in Brueggemann's words, "*imbibed on the profound anxiety of the Egyptian system? If one is a slave, one has anxiety about the brick quotas. If one is a Pharaoh, one is anxious about the food monopoly. In fact, Pharaoh and the slave colluded in common enterprise that made neighborliness impossible*"<sup>3</sup>

You see, it's our own anxiety, and our participation in an anxious system, that makes it almost impossible to live peacefully with one another. I was thinking about that as I read the news this week. I wondered specifically, what kind of anxiety must you live with as a parent - to pay thousands - even millions - to buy your way into a college - to ensure that your child attends not just a college, an ivy-league college? How oppressively great is the pressure to "keep up" - "to look the part" - "to succeed at all costs" - that you would have your child's face photoshopped onto another child's athletic picture in a college application? There must be an incredible sense of anxiety in the system - for a parent to go to such extreme lengths.

And I was thinking about the anxiety that certain white men must have to subscribe to a white-supremacist ideology - to commit such horrific violence and

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<sup>2</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Sabbath as Resistance*, p. 26

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, P. 26-27

terrorism - upon men, women, and children - as they gather in prayer? What kind of anxiety must you be feeling, to chant - “You will not replace us. Jews will not replace us” and other anti-immigrant sentiment... These are the telltale signs of a profound anxiety - brought on by a system which thrives on that anxiety - a system which tells us we must always be in competition with each other.

We live in a system which values people to our ability to create wealth. A system which objectifies, and commodifies people - instead of seeing each individual as inherently good. At Sinai - YHWH - offered an alternative - in the Ten Commandments. And, what’s really interesting is that Sabbath is the most important part. It’s given a special place, right in the middle, in vs. 8-11, and if you count the words - Sabbath gets the most “air-time” *by far*. Verses 8-11 are not just a bridge, *but the heart* of the Ten Commandments. It is a resistance to the life of anxiety learned in Egypt. It says.

***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.***

There had been no Sabbath in Egypt. No work stoppage; no work stoppage for Pharaoh who worked day and night to stay atop the pyramid. And by participating in the Sabbath - we begin to break the cycle of anxiety.

A little later in the movie - *Office Space* - one of his friends asks Peter Gibbons - “Are you going to quit?” “No, I’m just not going to work today.” “Aren’t they going to fire you?” “I don’t know... maybe. I’m just not going.”

I don’t mean to suggest that we should all stop going to work. But by keeping Sabbath we practice non-participation in a system that often becomes exploitative, and oppressive. And Jesus agrees - with this non-participation in the culture of anxiety - for he taught the disciples - “Why do you worry? About what you will eat or what you will wear?” (Matthew 6:25-34).

We live in a world of constant anxiety. It's what drives the economic system. Capitalism is designed to create anxiety, and then create the goods with which to satisfy that anxiety - but only until next year's model line is ready. Sabbath invites us to unplug from the tyranny of anxiety and scarcity. For many - there is an financial incentive to participate in this system of unending production. For others, the incentive is more subtle.

A parishioner remarked to me last week - "It strikes me that it's hard for pastors to keep Sabbath well." Yes, it's a challenge. But not because there is an added financial incentive to be always working, but there are other reasons we sometimes keep ourselves always busy. Some of us - feel a compulsion to be needed - To be involved - to be doing all the right things, making big changes, show up in all the places, to be there when people need you. We mistake busyness for faithfulness.

When I find myself caught in the hamster wheel of life, I remember the prayer attributed to Julian of Norwich -

*"All shall be well, all shall be well, all manner of things shall be well."*

That is not wishful thinking. That's not the power of positivity. This is radical faithfulness to a different way of being - outlined by a God of Life.

Ann Lewin - Writes on that theme:

*"All shall be well.."*

*She must have said that*

*sometimes through gritted teeth.*

*Surely she knew the moments*

*when fear gnaws at trust,*

*the future loses shape,*

*The courage that says  
all shall be well  
doesn't mean feeling no fear,  
but facing it, trusting  
God will not let go.*

*All shall be well  
doesn't deny present experience  
but roots it deep  
in the faithfulness of God,  
whose will and gift is life".*

Again, I invite to resist the anxiety-driven

And make sabbath-keeping our Lenten discipline.

Amen.