

19.3.24

“Sabbath as Resistance to Coercion”

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Deuteronomy 5:12-15

We’re now three weeks into the season of Lent, and three weeks into our study of Sabbath as Resistance. Last week I preached about sabbath as resistance to anxiety - and referenced the anxiety of Pharaoh ( and modern-day pharaohs), and how it trickles down to those who are a party of that economic system - and how, in fact, they collude with pharaoh in the anxious, and never-ending brick-making of Empire. And How YHWH offered the Hebrew people a “New Deal” - and alternative path - in the Covenant at Mt. Sinai.

This morning, we consider what it means to think of Sabbath as Resistance to Coercion. But before I get too far along - I want to check-in with everyone. Maybe you’re thinking - “Where is the talk of *sabbath for us* in all this? When we began talking about Sabbath as a focus for Lent, we thought we signed on for a nice easy-going series about rest, peace, renewal and self-care... then you hit us with the Ten Commandments... *what gives, Pastor?*”

Well, I was talking with Kevin Bruce, co-leader of our third-thursday contemplative service, and Tuesday Book Group, and he shared that the book group was curious about just this question - Why the only talk of Sabbath has been from the Old Testament - and the tradition of Judaism. They were wondering if other traditions might also have meaningful things to say, also. Indeed, yes, they do.

One writer who I’ve found particularly inspiring is - Thich Nhat Hanh - the Buddhist Priest from Vietnam, who introduced mindfulness to the West. He writes: *We will be more successful in all our endeavors if we can let go of the habit of running all the time, and take little pauses to relax and re-center ourselves. And we’ll also have a lot more joy in living.*

That’s Sabbath wisdom, if ever there was. And there are many other words of wisdom that might help us take these lessons to heart *individually* - I hope we have an opportunity to share them with one another...But here’s the thing, Walter Brueggemann is an Old Testament scholar. Yes, he’s a pastor, and preacher, but what he loves and knows best, are the Hebrew scriptures. We teach from what we know best. So for Brueggemann, the most compelling narrative, is the story of the liberation of the Hebrew people, the exodus from Egypt, the wandering in the Wilderness, and the journey to Promised Land - everything in the first five books of our Bible - what scholars call, the Pentateuch. As Kevin and I reflected, some authors focus on the New Testament, some on world religions, for Bruggemann, it’s the story of the people of Israel. And for him, these are not just stories rooted in a particular history, but stories *encoded with universal truths* - by which we all might better understand our existence in this world.

And it feels like a bit of a “bait and switch” to title the book as it is, but I’m not sure that given our busy lives, any of us would have picked up a book about the Ten Commandments - and yet, from his study, he had identified a hunger that we have today, for sabbath. And what he says about sabbath is - “*Sabbath is not simply the pause that refreshes. It is the pause that transforms.*” In Ch. 3, entitled “Resistance to Coercion,” Brueggemann marks the development of the relationship between the Hebrew people and YHWH over the course of time, and how the people made a defining choice when they entered into a covenant with God at Mt. Sinai.

They chose to put their faith in God, and providence. They chose to give their allegiance to YHWH, instead of Pharaoh. And yet this promise was not easy for them to sustain, and after making this promise - they quickly fell back into old anxious ways. Moses remains with God on the mountain for 40 days, and in the time it takes between Exodus 24 and Exodus 32 - they become anxious again. Moses is away on the mountain - some fear him for dead. God seems absent - So out of their acute anxiety - they attempt to buy their way to security - attempt to build their way to security - through the casting of an idol. Brueggemann notes - god-making amid anxiety is standard human procedure.<sup>1</sup>

But in so doing, they immediately break the first commandment - angering the creator god. And as a consequence, Moses breaks the stone tablets, and dissolves the covenant. For a moment, the people are hopeless and Moses despairs. But then in Exodus 32-34, Moses prays to, pleads with, YHWH, and in an amazing act of forgiveness, God forgives and agrees to begin again. A new covenant is established, but with slight variation. When YHWH speaks to sabbath the second time (in 34:21) - there is no reference to the Creator or creation narrative. Instead, this time, it says, “*Six days you shall work, but on the seventh day you shall rest; even in plowing time and in harvest time you shall rest.*” Henceforth, the sabbath commandment is tied to the land - and trusting the natural rhythms of creation to provide what is needed.

This is important, because at this time, Moses is preparing the people for a major shift. For all these years, they have wandered in the wilderness. Trusting in the God of heaven to provide for them. Now, they are preparing to enter a new land, and settle there. It is a land filled with the promise of prosperity. And so, Moses stops at the Jordan River - in the book of Deuteronomy - and gives Israel instruction for the new land... and that instruction lasts for 30 chapters. Why does Moses spend so much time in instruction?

He sees the fertile land as a temptation - a seduction, even. Moses knows that the “affluence of the land is sure to create a crisis in covenant faith. The new land will work so well that the people will think they can manage on their own. They will be tempted to autonomy, without due reference to YHWH. And the reason is that the new land will make them inordinately prosperous. And Moses knows, “*Prosperity breeds amnesia.*” And so he reminds them to remember from where they came. To not forget that it was the Lord who brought them up out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. Not to forget that they had lived in a system of

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Sabbath as Resistance*, p. 34.

unbearable coercion - where they had to meet impossible production schedules of more and more bricks.

And Moses knows, as they enter into this new land of prosperity - if they are not alert to, mindful of, focused on the God of emancipation - they will end up right back in another system of coercion. Because the land will make them happy. But the productivity of the land will make them want more. And, if they are not careful, they will think the goal of life is to acquire more, and more, and more. And to acquire more, they will compete with their neighbors. In Brueggemann's words... *"The system will turn one's neighbor into a competitor and a threat and a challenge. Moses warns Israel to "Watch out!" or the land and its productivity will transform them into producers and consumers and will destroy the fabric of the covenantal neighborhood."*

As wanderers in the wilderness, they were dependent on God's care. But with the introduction of land - and the transition from a hunter-gatherer culture to an agricultural land, a whole new theology of possession was required. For in one way, land is bought and sold like any other commodity. But in another way, the land is given as a birthright and inheritance of the whole people of God. If it's just a possession - the best thing is get more and more. If the land is an inheritance, the proper way of life is to enhance the neighborhood and the extended family, that that all members may enjoy the good produce of the land. <sup>2</sup>

It's clear how the covenant at Sinai understands this relationship, but we are a forgetful species, humanity. And so Moses reminds the people. It's not with our ancestors YHWH made this covenant, but with us. Who are here alive today (Deuteronomy 5:2-3). Moses says, yes the situation is new, but the covenant promises are the same, even in this new context of possibility. Moses expects the people to reject the acquisitive culture of its neighbors for the sake of a covenantal alternative. And a defining movement of the commandments is the movement away from coveting the possessions of one's neighbors - and a keeping of the whole covenant that was instituted at Sinai.

And so, in Deuteronomy, Moses restates the commandment to keep sabbath - for children, servants, livestock, immigrants and strangers... *so that they may rest as well as you!* That's new. "That they may rest as well as you." Brueggemann notes - *"Sabbath is the great day of equality when all are equally at rest. Not all are in equal production. Some perform more efficiently than others. Not all are equal in consumption. Some have greater access to consumer goods. In a society defined by production and consumption, there are huge graduations of performance and, therefore, of worth and significance. In such a social system, everyone is coerced to perform better - produce more, consume more -- to be a good shopper! Such valuing, of course, creates "haves" and "have nots," significant and insignificant, rich and poor, people with access, and people denied access."* <sup>3</sup>

Sabbath interrupts the stratification of value and resources. You don't have to do more, sell more, control more, know more. You don't have to have your child signed up for soccer, or

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p. 38.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. p. 40.

dance, or music lessons. You don't have to be younger or more beautiful. You don't have to score more. Keeping-Sabbath, in the way it was intended - breaks that pattern of coercion and makes all, like you, *equal* - in worth, value, access, rest.

Moses knows that the temptation to covet, to compete, to own, and amass more... is a huge temptation. And the temptation to forgetting - our own history - or our neighbor's value - is great, especially in an affluent environment. In fact, growing affluence affords people the privilege of distancing ourselves from our sometimes impoverished pasts, as well as our impoverished neighbors. The more we amass, the greater is our temptation to insulate ourselves from our other - to forget our *equality* with our neighbors - to believe that we, are better, than them.

Brueggemann writes, Sabbath is the great festival of freedom, when Pharaoh and all coercive expectations are dismissed and there is free bread and free water and free milk and free wine. The prophet Isaiah says, "Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters, you who have no money, come, buy and eat. Come, buy wine, and milk, without money and without price. (Isaiah 55:1)" Then asks the question - "Why do you spend your money on that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food." (Isaiah 55:2).

*"Sabbath is not only a festival day, but a new social reality that is carried back into days one through six. People who keep Sabbath live all seven days differently. The task, according to Moses, is to "seven" our lives."*<sup>4</sup> How might we do that today, friends? In Deuteronomy, Sabbath meant the cancellation of debts, and restoration of land, every seven years - to prevent there every being a permanent underclass. He exhorted the people to radical generosity to give liberally (Deuteronomy 15:10). And he told them to consider the vulnerable, especially. Deuteronomy names widows, orphans, and immigrants as needy members of society who were without protected rights. This week there was a report that 50,000 men, women, and children are being held by Immigration, Customs, and Enforcement. What might Sabbath mean for them?

Deuteronomy, says, *"You shall not deprive a resident alien or an orphan of justice; you shall not take a widow's garment in pledge. Remember that you were a slave in Egypt and the Lord your God redeemed you from there..."* And it goes on to say that that they should leave grain in their fields, and grapes on their vines, for the alien, the orphan, and the widow. The Sabbath day is a day to see the vulnerable, exposed neighbor - and remember that they are "like you" - and make it so - like you - they also can enjoy peace and rest.

Brueggemann writes - *"Sabbath is not simply a pause. It is an occasion for reimagining all social life away from coercion and competition to compassionate solidarity. Such solidarity is imaginable and capable of performance only when the drivenness of acquisitiveness is broken. Sabbath is not simply the pause that refreshes. It is the pause that transforms."*<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p. 44

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p. 45

I sincerely hope you are taking some time during this Lenten to practice your own sabbath-keeping; taking time to take a walk in nature, make a visit to the coast, spend a day at the spa, make quiet time for contemplation, meditation, or prayer. I hope you're taking time to breathe. Reflect. To renew your Spirit. To be with those you care about, and celebrate Sabbath as a god-given gift meant to bring *you* LIFE...**And...**I hope we're also inspired to think about Sabbath as a little bit *more* ... I hope, through this study, that we're all beginning to think of sabbath as a radical non-cooperation with systems that deny life... *to us, and others.*

I hope we see it as an invitation to *radical solidarity with our neighbors* - and remembering there are those who can't rest - those who aren't allowed to rest - those who are willing and sometimes *unwilling* participants in systems of oppression in our world. And God has promised Sabbath as a gift *for all* - because, truly, there is no "Them" ... only "Us."

As Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. said during the Civil Rights area - "We may have arrived on different ships, but we're all in this boat together." We must always remember this sense of togetherness. We must always remember this call to Sabbath is for us, and for our neighbor.

Amen.