



“Practicing Sabbath”

Exodus 20:8-10; Hebrews 4:9-11; Mark 2:23-28

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Second Sunday in Lent

My first experience of real Sabbath was in Israel. I was part of a Christian delegation hosted by the Israeli Ministry of Tourism. It was a more peaceful time in that part of the world, and Israel was trying to get us to bring tour groups to Israel. As part of the event we traveled and experienced a bit of life in Israel.

Friday afternoon, as Sabbath approached, we traveled a short distance from the seaport city of Acre to Nahariya, the northern-most city in Israel, located on the Mediterranean Sea, just six miles from the border with Lebanon.

At sundown, the official beginning of Sabbath, we gathered with our Israeli hosts in the hotel ballroom for Shabbat Shalom, the traditional Sabbath evening feast. A Rabbi pronounced the traditional Shabbat blessing on the day, the food, and all of us gathered. Then joining Jews all over the world, we lifted cups of wine in a toast called “The Cup of Blessing.”

With smiles all around we sat down to enjoy the feast – and a feast it was. As it happened I was the only Christian at my table. Most of the others were members of the same family, an Israeli government official stationed out of the country, and his daughters he hadn’t seen for a year.

He apologized that he’d spend the meal catching up with his daughters, so I was on my own. The next several hours were a delightful portrait of love and joy expressed in smiles, laughter, affectionate touches, and constant chatter – in Hebrew.

It was a little glimpse into what Sabbath is supposed to be: a small taste of God’s shalom on earth. After the feast, we moved to the lobby of the hotel where townspeople and old friends joined us. The room was a like a large family reunion filled with happy, loud chatter, warm embraces, and vigorous conversation.

I was part of an ancient and powerful tradition that has enlivened and shaped Judaism for millennia. Sabbath is a distinguishing mark of Jewish life. For six days all life points toward the Sabbath, the day of rest. Six days are spent wrestling with the creation, organizing and managing God’s world, wrestling and struggling with it, too often living in its tyranny. Then for one day, the Sabbath, all work ceases, God’s people turn from the creation of our world to rest in God’s creation. Sabbath is a day to disengage from the ordinary, to enter the world of the extraordinary: a day to enjoy God, God’s creation, family, and friends.

Keeping the Sabbath is the fourth of the Ten Commandments. It is by far the longest of the commandments, and it is linked to the character of God as creator. God rested on the seventh day of creation, and by resting declares that the creation is good and invites

us to take pleasure in the creation – as God does. Six days we manage God’s world and on the seventh day, God tells us to stop and enjoy the creation.

The Rabbis, of course, have much to say about the Sabbath. They suggest that on the Sabbath all God’s children must join each other at play. Sabbath preparation is critical. Sabbath keepers should bathe for the event (not an easy task before indoor plumbing), put on clean, good clothes, set the table with the best china and silver – everyone is rich on the Sabbath. It’s the way life is supposed to be.

On the Sabbath arguments stop, postponed for twenty-four hours. Even those in mourning suspend their mourning for a day. Sabbath is a day for sheer joy. All commerce ceases and couples are encouraged to make love. It’s a time to stop work and for joy to begin. On the Sabbath, people must enjoy each other, God, and the whole world. On Sabbath God’s people aren’t even supposed to think about work. They are supposed to disengage from the ordinary world and enter into joyous love of God, family and friends.

The Jews were so good at observing Sabbath, the Romans thought them quite lazy. In fact the Empire exempted Jews from military duty. It seems the Jews’ commitment to shalom one day a week was incompatible with the Roman war machine.

For three thousand years now, that Sabbath tradition has proved to be good for the soul, for family cohesion, and community vitality. As the Rabbis put it, “Jews keep the Sabbath, and the Sabbath keeps the Jews.”

Lauren Winner is a new and delightful spiritual writer. A convert from Judaism, Winner’s spiritual memoir, *Girl Meets God*, is a delightful and provocative read. Winner freely admits she misses Sabbath rest. Like most modern Christians, she doesn’t really disengage from the rest of the week on Sunday.

She’s written another book titled, *Mudhouse Sabbath*, in which she remembers and applies Jewish customs to her new Christian life. Interestingly, Winner quotes a Jewish convert to Christianity, Nan Fink, about preparing for the Sabbath:

On Friday afternoon...we’d rush home. Flying into the kitchen we’d cook ahead for the next twenty-four hours....Sometimes I’d think how strange it was to be in such a frenzy to get ready for a day of rest.

Shabbat preparations had their own rhythm, and once the table was set and the house straightened, the pace began to slow. [After showering] I’d linger in the bathroom...taking as much time as I could to settle into a mood of quietness. When I joined [my husband] Michael and his son for the lighting of the candles, the whole house seemed transformed....

Shabbat is like nothing else. Time as we know it does not exist for these twenty-four hours, and the worries of the week soon fall away. A feeling of joy appears. The smallest object, a leaf or a spoon, shimmers in a soft light, and the heart opens. Shabbat is a meditation of unbelievable beauty.

After the Sabbath candle is lit, many families turn to the door to welcome Queen Shabbat, the blessed day of rest, into their home. A ritual blessing follows. The day is blessed, the food blessed and, then, the parents move from child to child blessing each of them. The ritual cup of blessing, a toast to Sabbath, if you will, is shared, and a long day devoted to sheer gladness begins. Twenty-four hours later Sabbath is bid a ritual farewell with sadness.

Obviously the modern Christian practice of Sabbath keeping is quite different. Sunday, the Christian Sabbath, has lost much of its original, historic Sabbath character. It wasn’t always so. Our ancestors took the Sabbath very seriously, often too seriously.

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The Puritans were Sabbath keepers. They often said, “Good Sabbaths make good Christians.” They were right. A day devoted to the Lord – we call it “The Lord’s Day” – is a good and necessary gift from God.

However, humans have a way of turning God’s gifts into obligations burdened with rules and regulations. The Sabbath, meant to be a day of sheer enjoyment and rest, got lost in a thicket of rules, regulations, and laws. The Puritans were notorious for enforcing church attendance and forbidding recreation, sports, even travel on Sunday. Many of us can remember Sunday Blue Laws that kept stores closed on Sunday until fairly recently. Some states still restrict liquor sales on Sunday – a last vestige of the old Blue Laws.

I suppose part of the modern loss of Sabbath keeping is a reaction against the legalisms that lack the spirit of a biblical Sabbath. We may have lost part of our souls as a consequence.

Jesus was often a critic of Sabbath practices of his day – but he never opposed the Sabbath itself. He kept the Sabbath. He opposed rules and regulation that twisted Sabbath rest out of its original intent. He declared that God created the Sabbath for humankind and our enjoyment; God didn’t create us for Sabbath keeping. He went on to say that he was the Lord of the Sabbath – a revolutionary teaching never given adequate reflection in the church. What would a day devoted to the Lord Christ be like? It is, after all, the Lord’s Day!

Jesus taught that Sabbath is a high priority for his disciples, a day transformed by his presence. The author of our Epistle Lesson adds that God promises a Sabbath rest larger than any seventh day to Christians.

But restoring the Sabbath is not easy these days. Our lives are complicated, busy and getting more busy and complicated all the time. More and more, work is creeping into all of life. We are working more and enjoying it less. The electronic revolution makes work impossible to leave at the office

And if you are a parent you are being stretched in every direction. Between work and a myriad of other obligations, priorities are difficult to maintain and balance hard to keep these days.

If all this weren’t enough, the current economic crisis adds to the complication. Many of you have told me the same thing. “Work is no fun these days.” It’s unpleasant and the stress is debilitating.

Often, our lives seem to be caught in a swirl of conflicting powers and demands.

We need the Sabbath – more than ever we need this gift from God to restore our souls, refresh our lives, and balance our priorities. Sabbath has that kind of transforming power.

But first we have to accept that the Christian Sabbath, the Lord’s Day, is a gift from God that is both necessary and good for us. We need time marked off by a beginning and an end. We need time disengaged from our ordinary lives, time attached to the things that really count. We need to devote ourselves to rest, God, family, friends, and the community of faith.

Abraham Heschel was one of the great Jewish theologians of the last century. His book, *Sabbath*, is a classic. Written in 1950, the language is old but the thought is as fresh as today:

He who wants to enter the holiness of the day must first lay down the profanity of clattering commerce, of being yoked to toil. He must go away from the screech of dissonant days, from the nervousness and fury of

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acquisitiveness and the betrayal in embezzling his own life. He must understand that the world has already been created and will survive without the help of man. 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. The world has our hands, but our soul belongs to Someone Else. Six days a week, we seek to dominate the world; on the seventh day, we try to dominate the self.

I suggest beginning the Sabbath in the old, traditional way. The Puritans followed the Jewish tradition and marked the beginning of Sabbath on Saturday evening. A ritual meal was shared and God invoked and welcomed into the Lord's Day of rest.

Some of us are old enough to remember Sunday Dinner. We'd come home from church to a house filled with the delicious aroma of a roast. Still in our Sunday best, we'd sit down to the feast of the week. Often friends were invited, or we went to the home of friends for Sunday Dinner. We'd feast, then rest and talk – or the children would play quietly, or loudly!

Sunday Dinner is gone, replaced by Sunday Brunch - not a bad substitute, but not the same thing. Why not move Sunday Dinner to Saturday night? Mark the beginning of the Lord's Day in a family feast with or without friends. Welcome the rest of the coming day, welcome the Lord into the Lord's Day and begin twenty-four hours devoted to sheer gladness. Forget the rest of life if we can, and just relax in the presence of God, the love of family and the rich gift of friendship.

Then on Sunday morning, join the community of faith with new eyes, a fresh heart, and a song in our souls.

In the best sense of the term, what we are doing now, resting in God and in the presence of family and friends, this is real life. And it is good – in itself and good for us too.

Amen.

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