

“Rest for Restless People”
Exodus 20:8-11

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Six months ago I was in a meeting with Edgewood’s Governance Council and we started talking about my upcoming sabbatical. It is a common practice that about every five years of service in a church, pastors leave for sabbatical for a few months. My sabbatical was on the horizon and we were beginning conversations of all the logistics it would involve, all the different types of planning and communication it would require of us. Someone spoke up in this conversation and said, “Whatever we do, I don’t want someone to say in July, “Where’s Pastor Liz? Did something happen to her? Why haven’t we seen her this summer?”

It was a very real concern - particularly with the backdrop of the pandemic making communication and connection even more difficult. Next Sunday will be my last Sunday at Edgewood until September 12th. Enotes, emails, and Facebook has been full of all the details - information about Rev. Lily who will be serving Edgewood part-time this summer and leading us in worship on Zoom as the sanctuary is prepared for us to regather, information about the logistics, invitations to connect before I leave - which about 86 of you have done, conversations that have been the honest to goodness highlight and biggest joy of my last year. So hopefully by now you’ve caught the gist of the details, but today I want to talk about the theological and spiritual reasons for this sabbatical.

Most of us are familiar with sabbaticals from the academic world - a time away from the classroom to spend a semester deep in research and writing in ones field - but sabbaticals for clergy are a little different. Instead of being rooted in the need to do something else or produce something, they are rooted in the spiritual practice of sabbath.

Sabbath first finds its place in scripture in Genesis's creation story. God spent six days creating the heavens and the earth, the wind and the waters, light and dark, land and seas, plants and fruit trees, the sun and the stars, birds and sea monsters, and every living creature that moves, of every kind, and humans of all genders. God created and crafted and shaped our world, blessing her work, proclaiming it to be good. The story goes on to say that on the seventh day God finished her work and spent that seventh day resting from all the work that had been done. God blessed this seventh day and made it holy.

The early Hebrew people practiced sabbath as a way of echoing God's rest in the midst of creating. In Exodus we read that their Sabbath practice became so important to their values and expression of their spirituality that it became one of the ten commandments passed from God to Moses on Mount Sinai. "Remember the Sabbath day and treat it as holy. Six days you make work and do all your tasks, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord our God." Not you, or your children, or people who work for you, or your animals, or any person living in your lands shall work. If God could take the time to rest, so can you because who are we to think our work is more important or urgent than God's work. (That last part might be paraphrased.)

I am pretty sure that ever since Moses shared that commandment with the Hebrew people, there have been individuals and households and entire communities actively resisting rest, grumbling about rest, or trying to get out of rest. Humans are, with some exceptions, a restless people. We have created entire cultures where our worth is defined by our work. Particularly in capitalism, we fear that to stop working, to put down our tasks, to walk away from what someone else is telling us is important, is to become irrelevant or left behind or punished. We are driven by guilt, by the desire to achieve, by the desire to *be* someone, by the desire to do something meaningful or to produce.

For the most part, these are wonderful human qualities - look at the advances they have manifested in our world - the innovations and co-creations we have made that have connected us as people, have helped us survive unthinkable global tragedies, that have pushed us toward life and new life and new ways of living, again and again. Those are all amazing things that are born out of our work. And. That same restlessness, that same drive, that same determination or unwilling to take a break is also bound up in corruption, in greed, in manipulation of workers, in valuing output over health, in mass burnout as we become more and more addicted to our work.

The call to Sabbath is the call to wholeness and balance - to recognize that there is value in both our work AND our rest. It is a call to see both as gifts to cultivate, not as competitors, but as complimentary practices that strengthen and sustain each other. Surely I know the value and joy of rest after a hard day of work - it often takes work for me to appreciate rest when I experience it. And surely my work benefits from rest - rest is an act regeneration and energizing that allows me to go deeper into work when I return.

I recently attended a webinar with Tricia Hersey who is the found of the Nap Ministry, an organization that examines the liberating power of naps and proclaims REST IS RESISTANCE. Hersey spoke about resting as a generative space. She asks us, “What are we missing out on when we don’t rest? What are we missing out on when we aren’t allowed to slow down enough gain the knowledge we need?”

It is this reframe that I find the power in practicing Sabbath. Rest isn’t the end goal, but when we allow ourselves to rest, we create space for new ideas, we create space for playfulness, we create space to listen to God’s voice and hear what it might be saying to us. Some of my best thinking and dreaming comes in those moments when I am laying in bed waiting for sleep, when my body is still but my mind continues to move. When I free myself from the expectation of

where my thoughts will go or what they should be focusing on, it is there that I start to imagine new ways of being, imagine healing in our communities and in my life, it is there that some of my wildest and best ideas have been born, causing me to reach for the paper and pen I keep at my bedside so I can capture them. When we rest, we are cultivating space for the unknown.

Practicing sabbath is the discipline of regular rest, of regular regeneration, knowing that what comes out of that might allow you to follow God in new ways, or in the case of clergy, allow you to lead God's people in new ways. I believe churches like Edgewood support their clergy taking a season of sabbatical not because they think we're tired or burned out, but because they have faith that in the rest we will hear how God is calling us and our church to new or renewed ministry and a new or renewed vision for our future together. Many of you have asked me what I am doing this summer and my first answer is, "Nothing." I am intentionally leaving my sabbatical as unstructured as possible because I want to create the most space imaginable for God to find me, to dream new dreams, to see where my mind wanders, and to spend entire days and weeks in creativity and play.

For me that will look like writing and reading, but also quilting and biking and cooking and snoozing. Time on my patio and time with my loved ones. Walks with my dog that can last as long as our legs carry us. Picking up my ukulele and strumming until calluses form on my fingers. These are the activities that help my mind wander, that open my heart, and where I reconnect with the small, still voice inside me that helps me love and lead and serve in the church.

It's not only clergy that should practice sabbath or imagine what a sabbatical season might be like. I know there is deep privilege in working in a place that supports extended time away, but sabbath is a faith practice that each of us should strive to cultivate in our lives, one day

a week, or one week a month, or a few hours at a time. How are you intentionally setting apart time for rest and renewal? What are the spaces where your mind wanders and reconnects with your heart or where ideas are fostered and God's voice speaks clearly?

Tricia Hersey says that "Rest isn't the end goal, but instead it is the tool or vehicle to dismantling systems of oppression." That means all you folks who are up to your eyeballs in advocacy work and volunteering and saving the world need rest more than any of us. We need you to dream of a different world, one where all people are free. We need you to imagine how we might create justice and peace where there is oppression and war. We need you rested, clear on who you are and how you are called to serve. We need rest, each one of us, at every stage of life. The last bit of wisdom I gleaned from Hersey is that we must "understand that no one is going to give you rest. It is our divine right, our human right, that we make space and rest for ourselves." This is a practice that comes from within. It is between you and God. It is up to you to claim it and cultivate it for yourself.

This summer I am reading Wayne Muller's classic text, "Sabbath: Finding Rest, Renewal, and Delight in Our Busy Lives." I invite you to read it as well, think of it as our together but apart summer book club. I have been promised that this book will not only teach you about the practice and history of Sabbath, but will encourage you and inspire you to cultivate it in your own life. We'll see if it has wisdom enough to still our restless spirits.

If you would like a resource that dives into the more practical, gritty, day-to-day struggle of practicing sabbath with quite a bit of humor and grace woven in, I recommend the book "Sabbath in the Suburbs" A Family's Experiment with Holy Time" by MaryAnn McKibben-Dana. It is written by a mom with two young kids who commits to keeping one family sabbath day a week for a year - and it is full of love and insight and honesty about what kind of sacrifices

and struggles and creativity a sabbath practice requires. Even though I don't have kids, I found her story deeply relatable and highly recommend it.

For many of us a good book is a gateway to rest and activating our imaginations - for others it might be a good movie, an empty page, a garden, a recipe, a pair of running shoes, binoculars, or the presence of a loved one and a day without an agenda. May this been a sabbatical summer for us all, however that looks, finding our way back to God, allowing rest to feed our work and pausing work long enough to rest. I'd like to end with a poem that was shared in Hersey's webinar.

"On This Day"
Ruth Forman

On This Day.

this is a day without chairs
a day where all the rooms melt together
and there are only corners/corners and humming
wishes and slight breeze
brushing you like palms
this is a day of prayers
a day of painful breaking/a day of peace beneath
a day of arms
of hands
eyes and quiet windows

i wish you love from your mother backwards

i wish you deep tunnels without fear
i wish you children's laughter
i wish you cactus flowers
i wish you moonlight
i wish you real eyes
i wish you a hand across your back/soft like when you were a child
i wish you tears
i wish you clean
i wish you angels in conference around your bed holding you
so there is no space for me even to touch you/just watch

i wish your mother watching

i wish you abalone dreams

i wish you peace

i wish you doves in your kitchen

moonlight in your bathroom

candles when your eyes close and dawn when they open

i wish you so many arms across your shoulders

so many lips kissing your ears that you smile from the inconvenience

i wish you all your babies' love attacking the center of your heart

just so you know they are there

i wish you banisters, railings, and arms around your waist

i wish you training wheels, i wish you strong shoes

i wish you water o i wish you water

through your feet flowing like a stream

and i wish you hammocks

and melon on your eyes

strawberries in your mouth

and fingers in your hand

fingers in your hand all day

through this house

on this day with no rooms

only corners

and an uncommon breeze

Resources:

“Sabbath: Finding Rest, Renewal, and Delight in Our Busy Lives.” Author: Wayne Muller.

“Sabbath: in the Suburbs: A Family’s Experiment with Holy Time.” Author: MaryAnn McKibben-Dana.

