



SUMMER SERMON SERIES

WHAT DOES SABBATH MEAN?



"God Resting on the Sabbath." Engraving by Vasily Koren.
This image appeared in the earliest known engraved Bible in Russian.

YOUR BULLETIN COVER TODAY is an image that appears in the earliest known engraved Bible in Russian. It shows God, resting on the sabbath. It's not an image we see often illustrated, but I believe it's an important one, because God resting is at the core of our understanding of sabbath.

And, friends, trust me, if God can rest, you can rest.

Last week, Rev. Joanne Whitt preached on how Sabbath means freedom, for *everyone*. And today, we are looking at how Sabbath means to abide in love.

As a means to help us do some "abiding" this morning, I offer a poem called "Night Swimming" by Joseph Fasano

The full moon rises over the river.
(Go in. Do not be coy.)

Yes the wars and yes the hell
and wreckage
But you cannot save
a life
if you are broken.

Briefly, just this briefly, be here.

(The moon, the chill, the river) –

You are not betraying anyone
by choosing joy.

SABBATH MEANS ABIDING IN LOVE

Friends, let us worship the God of the sabbath.

Genesis 2:1-3

Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude. And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and she rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation.

John 15:9-15

As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

SO, WE HAVE TWO SCRIPTURE LESSONS TODAY—one from Genesis, which means the beginning, and one from the gospel of John, where Jesus is talking to his disciples.

In the beginning, we learn that God creates. God creates the heavens and the earth, the seas and the plants, the animals and humankind. And we read that on the seventh day God has finished their work and chooses to rest.

Now, in this creation narrative, we learn that God declares all that is created is good. Again and again, the refrain is, "And God saw that it was good."

However, while *everything* is good, God only gives *three* blessings at the time of creation. In chapter 1, verse 22, God blesses the creatures. In verse 28, God blesses the humans. And then, in chapter 2, verse 3, God blesses rest, the sabbath day.

Rev. Kara Root reminds us that it is, “a radical thing to have a Deity who rests.

To be so secure in one’s power and place as to stop and step back? ...

An integral part of creating this earth, for God, is enjoying the beauty and harmony of each creature and feature contributing its unique music to the exquisite symphony.” In other words, “God does not create for the sake of creating, God creates to enjoy and relate and connect [with all that’s been created].”¹

Friends, when is the last time you *enjoyed* creation? If we are created in the image of God, and indeed we are, then, we, too, need to take the time to rest in the beauty of all that’s been created.

Sabbath is many things: rest, an invitation to freedom, a call to help liberate others. And sabbath is the ability to delight and abide in the love of God found in creation and in relationship.

In the gospel of John, Jesus invites us to abide in him. We are made for the love found in Jesus, made to live in and share this love. And like the God in our Genesis text, we’re meant to *enjoy* the life we’ve been given, to share in the fullness of life that Jesus exhibits and offers.

Earlier in the gospel of John, Jesus says, “I have come that they may have life, and have it *abundantly*,” (John 10:10). That *abundance*, that fullness, comes from being able to abide in Christ, and to rest in God’s love. *That’s* the purpose of sabbath. Not to just recharge your batteries, so you can go back to work, but so you can delight in life and love and find a joy that is complete. It is to reconnect with God and God’s creation, in order to find our joy in those relationships.

Friends, do not put your joy on the backburner. Your joy is a form of resistance against the powers and principalities that reduce us to machines in the cog of productivity and output. Your joy is a part of the sabbath rest that God commands us to take. And your joy is made complete in God.

Now the Genesis text and the John text include two key verbs for understanding sabbath. We use the word “sabbath” as a noun. But in Hebrew, *shabath* (שָׁבַת) is first introduced as a verb. It means to cease or cause to stop, put down, or put away. It also means to rest, repose, and, get this: celebrate! So sabbath is both a letting go and a taking on.

What is God inviting you to let go of today?

And what is God encouraging you to take on today?

In Wayne Muller's book *Sabbath: Finding Rest, Renewal, and Delight in Our Busy Lives*, he writes that “sabbath” doesn't have to be a full, rigid day of religious rest.

It is any intentional, guilt-free pause to step away from productivity and refresh your soul.

One example he uses is familiar to many of us San Franciscans - simply taking the time to watch the puppies and kittens in the Macy's Holiday Windows at Union Square. Anyone done that?

For me, one of the times that I feel like I’m “sabbathing” (using that word as a verb) is when I’m slowly walking through Muir Woods, not hiking or trying to get through the path quickly or get my steps in, but strolling along with no sense of urgency.

In fact, when I allow myself to just sit and look up at the tall redwoods along that trail, I experience God in a deep and meaningful way and am able to delight in creation, perhaps as God did on that *first* sabbath. Which leads us to the Greek verb *meno* used in John’s gospel. This word is most often translated as “to abide” or “to remain.” Jesus says, “abide in me.”

But it also means to be present and to let yourself stay longer than you need with someone or at some place. It’s the old-fashioned verb “to tarry” as in take your sweet time, don’t be rushed, or hurried, or eager to go anywhere else, just tarry.

We live in a time and society where, even the idea of something like this, feels wrong. In fact, just this past week, I am embarrassed to admit, I took a call at the office at noon. Then I got in my car and started driving to my 2:45 in person meeting, but, on the way there, pulled over, so I that I could take a call in my car that

¹ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/authors/kara-k-root>

started at 1:30. Once the 1:30 call ended, I was able to find a parking spot close to my 2:45, and made it there just about on time.

This sort of way of living life, jumping from one meeting to the next, or one task to the next, is the opposite of tarrying, it's hurrying and harrying. We are called to abide, so we must get more comfortable with the ability to sit and stay and fully be in one place at one time.

Sometimes, our schedules demand a hurrying and harrying from us. But we also live in a time of what psychologists call "absent presence," and it has everything to do with, can you guess? Cell phones.

"Absent presence" is when a cell phone is physically visible or tangible, and acts as a constant reminder of the digital world, pulling us away from what is physically right in front of us. This then supposedly triggers in us a "poly-consciousness" where cognitive resources (so the things in our brain) are split between the physical person we're with and the potential of what lies in the phone.

So, yes, our schedules and our busy lives can demand so much of us. But it's also our compulsion for these devices and the potential information or stories or updates that lie waiting for us, right in the palm of our hands, that keep us from being able to abide.

And don't get me wrong, I am grateful for these devices that can open us to a whole world that is beyond the physical one we inhabit. We can do so much through them! But it makes it exceptionally challenging to abide in just *one* place, because we are always being invited into the multiple, digital spaces they offer.

When Jesus says to abide in him, *meno*, he means fully, with complete presence.

Now that doesn't mean our online connections and the music and stories and podcasts we watch and listen to can't fully engage who we are. Nor does it mean that they are inherently bad in some way.

But did you know that the mere presence of a smartphone on a table can make your conversation partner feel unheard and disconnected? Even if you're not *on* your phone, even if it's facedown or turned off, studies show that merely having a device in sight, reduces the trust, empathy and satisfaction experienced in that encounter.

The reality is our phones act as a visual cue of our divided attention, our lack of presence, and our inability to abide with who or what is before us. And so, if we want those we love to feel we are giving them our undivided attention, if we want to abide in love and help others experience and feel that love, sometimes that phone has to be out of sight and put away. This goes across all generations, not just Gen Z and Gen Alpha; my dad is on his phone all the time!

So we have two verbs before us today:

The Hebrew verb *shabbath* - to pause, to celebrate rest, and to delight in God and in creation. And the Greek verb: *meno* - to abide, to remain, to be fully present and to stay present.

And both of these are so that our joy may be complete (John 15:11) and so that we might love one another. So, before you leave church this morning, I want you to consider: what brings you joy?

Do not consider it a frivolity, but as a part of keeping the sabbath. To do the work of God in the world, to love our neighbors and one another, we need you, and we need you whole. And without joy, you are not whole.

As the poem I shared in this morning's welcome states:

Yes the wars and yes the hell and wreckage
But you cannot save a life if you are broken. ...
You are not betraying anyone by choosing joy.

In fact, those who have gone before us, those who have lost their lives, or sacrificed them, we owe it to them to live life to its fullest.

So, take some sabbath rest this week, and allow yourself to abide in something you love, to delight in something in which you take great joy.

And perhaps during these next moments of a sabbath stillness, which we've included in worship in lieu of an affirmation of faith during this sabbath series, we can commit to abiding in love and taking time for joy.

Thanks be to God, Amen.