

The Dignity of God's Rest
Kyle Douglas Potter

Second Sunday after Pentecost, Year B

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Deuteronomy 5:12-15; Mark 2:23-3:6

Saint Mark's Episcopal Church, Milwaukee, Wis.

Sabbath-keeping attunes us to the rhythms of God's creative work, and defies the nightmare of scarcity enacted by all the little pharaohs in our world.



As a proud Kentuckian, I can't talk about Sabbath without sharing some lines from Wendell Berry.

The mind that comes to rest is tended
In ways that it cannot intend:
Is borne, preserved, and comprehended
By what it cannot comprehend.

Your Sabbath, Lord, thus keeps us by
Your will, not ours. And it is fit
Our only choice should be to die
Into that rest, or out of it.¹

Today's Scripture readings show that the rhythm of work and rest repeat throughout the drama of creation and redemption. God created a good world, with plants, and fish, and birds, and people, and rested. People and animals labor for food, for shelter, for meaning, and for joy, and we rest. When God redeemed Israel from slavery, God commanded them to keep that rhythm of work and rest in their private and public lives. God worked, and God stopped. The people of God worked, and they stopped. Sabbath-keeping testifies that all of God's creatures are worthy of the same rest that God took. Everyone must experience the dignity of this interruption. Everyone must enjoy the inconvenience of rest, just like God.

When the prophet Moses repeated God's command at the Jordan River, he linked this rhythm not to the creation of the world, but to the creation of Israel: "Remember that you

¹ Berry, Wendell, "1979:I," in *This Day: Collected & New Sabbath Poems* (Berkeley, Ca.: Counterpoint, 2013), 8-9.

were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm.” Not someone else. You.

You see, the Hebrew Bible will never allow its hearers to forget that Israel was created in a contest of the gods. The Creator of heaven and earth had a promise to keep – to make a great nation from the descendants of Abraham and Sarah. On the other side stood the king of Egypt and his pretensions to divinity. Pharaoh was “propelled by a nightmare of scarcity, [and] motivated by anxiety about not having enough.” He “brutally enact[ed that] nightmare” by exploiting and murdering the weak in order to make his own name great. Pharaoh’s ruthless regime of law and order showed which lives mattered and which did not. But Pharaoh’s attacks on human dignity offended God’s holiness. Pharaoh’s violence against the weak challenged God’s rule over the world.²

The book of the Exodus reads, “the people of Israel groaned because of their slavery and cried out for help. Their cry for rescue from slavery came up to God. And God heard their groaning, and God remembered [the] covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. God saw the people of Israel—and God knew.” (Exod 2:23–25). God met misery with mercy.

God sent Moses to command little Pharaoh to stop. But the exploitation and suffering continued, in denial of God’s kingship. So Moses answered Pharaoh’s challenges with divine violence. Israel’s God smashed the upstart god of Egypt with sickness, environmental devastation, dark wonders, and even death. Finally, “with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm,” (Deut 5:15) God drowned Egypt’s army in the Red Sea, while Moses and the Israelites carried away reparations — as much of Egypt’s riches as they could hold.

But God didn’t only free the people from slavery; God commanded them to keep Sabbath. The rhythm of work and rest would separate the dignified labor of a free people from the dehumanizing compulsion of slavery. And God’s free people share their dignity and joy with everyone around them. That’s why the weekly rest belonged to everyone: rich and poor, human and animal, citizen and stranger. Old donkeys and sheep dogs enjoyed God’s rest. Bakers and homebuilders waited for God’s rest. Even slaves and migrants had the right to God’s rest, and that was everyone’s responsibility. That’s why the command to

² Walter Brueggemann, “Scripture: Old Testament,” in Peter Scott, and William T. Cavanaugh, eds., *The Blackwell Companion to Political Theology*, 7–20. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 11; Eugene H. Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places: A Conversation in Spiritual Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 2008), 165.

keep sabbath wasn't merely ceremonial or some private religious concern; it was, and it is, *political* because it guides the ways that God's people engage with society.

Sabbath-keeping interrupts frenzied activity and creates space for reflection, gratitude, and joy. It's in that empty space that we learn to adore God. It's in that non-anxious space that we learn to say, "thank you."

This is the sense of Berry's stanza. We refuse to hurry, just for a bit. We stop working and remember that God cares for us:

The mind that comes to rest is tended
In ways that it cannot intend:
Is borne, preserved, and comprehended
By what it cannot comprehend.

When we finish our work and we stop, we refuse compulsion and rediscover the dignity of our labor.

Jesus' encounter with the Pharisees demonstrates how Pharaoh's nightmare can co-opt Sabbath-keeping. For Jesus' opponents, Sabbath was a key component of their law and order regime meant to reign in human weakness and messiness. Jesus rejected their version of Sabbath-keeping, because it undermined the purpose of God's law. God gave the law so that humans might flourish in friendship with God and one another, and be brought to maturity (Cf. Gal. 3:24). The Pharisees kept the letter of the law, but denied the spirit of it, because the cost of their obedience could be counted in the misery of others. God despises any vision of "the greater good" that must be built upon the backs of the weak. Jesus wouldn't wait to do good, because in God's Kingdom, every person and every animal *enjoys* sabbath; every created thing is worthy of the *wholeness* that the sabbath rhythm imparts.

But I can't be too hard on the Pharisees. You and I are constantly tempted to the panic of perfectionism that tormented them, and the nightmare of scarcity that drove Pharaoh wild. Our anxieties speak to us: "If you don't work through the weekend this time, you'll never be promoted." "This is just not the right time to take a day off." "If you put in just a little more, you can make this project perfect." "If you don't get this thing precisely right, they'll never take you seriously." "If I let him down, he'll never forget it." "Let me check this notification." These voices speak of a world in which we'll never have enough, unless we fight in every single moment. When we listen to them, it's hard to trust that God will care for us. We start to say stupid things, like "the gods help those who help themselves."

The nightmare doesn't stop with us checking e-mail in bed. When I give space to these voices and believe their account of this hard world, some of old Pharaoh's oppressive habits start to make sense. I worry that other people aren't working hard enough. I might ask whether a full-time McDonald's cook really "deserves" to make as much money as a firefighter. The real question, of course, is whether a single mom deserves to earn enough to pay for her rent and groceries, without taking a second job. I might lecture to someone, "life isn't fair," and forget that I grew up in a home with an affordable mortgage. "I can't help everybody," I might console myself, while helping no one.

You and I can deny Pharaoh's nightmare by joining God in meeting misery with mercy. Ask God for opportunities to give sabbath to others. Pay attention to workers. Talk to the Lord about who you see, and about what they might need. Overtip your hair stylist. Help someone get ahead on her bills. Buy groceries for an unemployed friend. Give some harried parents an evening of babysitting. Make dinner for someone. Give a worker reason to rejoice, and to bless God.

We can also provide sabbath for others by working for justice. Unemployment is presently low in Wisconsin, but that statistic doesn't tell the whole story. Many of the working poor hold jobs that require 12-hour days in ugly conditions, and provide no benefits. Others work multiple jobs to pay for food and rent, because they simply don't make enough. Some folks have good training and live quiet lives, but can't get the good jobs for which they're qualified, because of past trouble with the law. God sees them. And God knows. So some Saint Mark's folks are working on Common Ground's new Jobs Campaign, which will address some of these systemic injustices. If you'd like to get involved at any stage, make a note on your pew card, or check in with Deacon Michelle.

To keep Sabbath ourselves is a simple thing, but a difficult one. Start by saying no to the anxious voices. Stop for a day. Stop working. Stop being useful. Stop working to fix things. Stop trying to be better. Stretch out your withered hand. Be inefficient. Be messy. Dawdle about. Come waste time with us at coffee hour. Just *be*.

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In ways that it cannot intend:
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This is the gift of sabbath. Let yourself be carried by God. Let yourself be loved by God.
Amen.



Kyle Potter is a theology instructor and Ph.D. candidate at Marquette University. A native of Appalachian Kentucky, he holds an M.Th. in Applied Theology from the University of Oxford and an M.T.S in Liturgical Studies from the University of Notre Dame. He has a background in campus ministry and church work, and his research interests include the doctrine of the Eucharist, and the intersection of Christian ritual and spirituality. Kyle is a lay preacher licensed by the Episcopal Bishop of Milwaukee, and passionate about ecumenism. He's also a life-long indoor kid, and a lover of horror, science fiction literature, Baptists, and cats. Contact him on kyle.potter@gmail.com.



For Further Reading

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