

“Finding Sabbath in the Midst of Christmas”

Steve Ramer

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Scriptures

Exodus 20:1 Then God spoke all these words: 2 I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; 3 you shall have no other gods before me...8 Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. 9 Six days you shall labor and do all your work. 10 But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. 11 For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.

Mark 2:23 One sabbath he was going through the grainfields; and as they made their way his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. 24 The Pharisees said to him, "Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?" 25 And he said to them, "Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need of food? 26 He entered the house of God, when Abiathar was high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and he gave some to his companions." 27 Then he said to them, "The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath; 28 so the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath."

Sermon

So just in case you didn't know, Advent begins next Sunday. A four week long season on the liturgical calendar of waiting and getting ready for the arrival of our Savior JC.

It is during this time that we prepare ourselves not only for the reenactment of the most important thing to ever happen in our world, but to also more deeply reflect upon what it truly means that God has come to dwell among us.

It is not a season to set aside more time for shopping, or parties, or pageants and for decorating. That is what I call the Christmas season.

Now of course not all of that stuff is necessarily bad but they can distract us from what is truly most important.

I like Advent, but I do have some problems with Christmas. And Advent is so important to me that I have decided, unilaterally this year, to start Advent early by having a "get ready for Advent" service.

A couple of weekends ago Cathy and I were at Pastor Spouse retreat high in the mountains outside Colorado Springs and RMMC is an incredibly beautiful location.

Anita Amstutz, former pastor of Albuquerque Menno lead us through her new book on Sabbath called, "Soul Tending: A Journey into the Heart of Sabbath."

It was a powerful and important reminder of the importance of Sabbath keeping. And the more I absorbed her words the more I thought to myself, "Why not get started? Why not right now?"

After all the Advent season and Sabbath have so much in common. Especially considering the craziness of the Christmas season what could be more important than encouraging Sabbath time in order to help each of us to counter act some of the most distractive and destructive effects of the Christmas season?

Now I have preached on Sabbath keeping once or twice before, but during the summer months - when the "livi'n is easy and, well, life is usually a little less complicated.

So maybe I am a bit crazy to suggest that you consider it during what is likely the most hectic time of the year? Yes, I do understand that this is perhaps counter intuitive, but then when I consider carefully the Christmas story I don't see a whole lot that really make much sense!

Okay, you're probably asking, just what then is Sabbath? Well, for thousands of years our Jewish sisters and brothers have celebrated the twenty-four hours beginning with sundown on Friday evening until sundown on Saturday (the seventh day) as a time to cease from their labors as instructed by God. Some Jews do not cook, ride in cars, or even flip a light switch on shabbat.

But as we heard from Exodus, Sabbath practice is primarily a reminder, a huge participatory lesson, to make sure folks did not forget the one who is really in charge. The one who had created a bountiful world and who had saved them from slavery years ago and who has sustained them all these years since.

Some other sabbath instructions that were followed less often also included a seventh year where fields were not tilled, planted or harvested but were left fallow. Again these were reminders that God could and would still provide enough. As well there was to be a Jubilee year every 50 years

where debts were forgiven, land returned to their original owners and slaves were to be set free! Such practices of course would have had immense consequences of leveling out most economic inequality.

The early Christians decided to move their Sabbath to Sunday, or the first day of the week, in order to remember and celebrate the rising of Jesus from the tomb. And for centuries various Christian traditions have tried to limit what could and could not occur on that first day of the week.

As a child I remember stores closing on Sunday and apparently still today car dealers in Ft Collins can't be open on Sunday? On the farm Sunday certainly had a very different routine. Of course we had to milk the cows and feed the livestock but we didn't bail hay or cut wheat as the heathen did!

But that has all changed and so it is legit to ask ourselves, "Is Sabbath keeping still important?" Of course I believe it is still critically important!

Given the crazed expectations of our culture to consume I think saying, "NO" to shopping is a good thing. And considering as well the demands of our jobs to work harder and harder that eat away at our time for family or service or worship again saying NO and placing limits on work is important.

But Sabbath is also, more importantly, about saying yes. Yes, to Rest! Some of you look like you could use a bit more. Saying yes to Respite, to Reflection and to Renewal. Do these seem like a distant and fanciful dream to you?

Sabbaths are a time to Re-embrace simplicity and a time of Repetition of those healthier activities that can both heal our bodies and tend our souls.

We desperately need to Reconnect the spiritual to the rest of our life and thus become whole.

Through regular Sabbath we can Rebuild our lives and thus Resist the onslaught of a culture gone crazy with greed, and demands to consume more and more and that tears apart our fragile earth in order to extract more and more resources. And so Sabbath in the end will not only benefit us personally.

Read: p. ix: "We live in hungry times..."

Clearly we live in very "turbulent times." And so was the case when our lowly Savior was born.

In our own little neck of the woods the season of Advent arrives during the longest and coldest nights of the year. Literally it is winter all around us as nature herself stops, slows down, simplifies and takes her own Sabbath.

Why do we fail to take notice and still resist
that seasonal flow that is happening all around us?
Instead we put up more lights.

Is it to chase our fears of the darkness away?
Or to make sure our productivity doesn't falter?
Or for more entertainment that can distract us from the pain
in our world that continues even as the birth of Jesus approaches?

But in the end healthier communities and cultures
are built by healthy individuals and communities.
Read: p. 11 ... the goal is to ...

This can happen in so many ways but the first step
as Anita points out, is to simply simplify.
We must likely let go of something we are currently doing,
before we can replace it with something that will help us
see with more clarity the sacred hidden and already present in our lives.

Maybe we learn a mantra (ask for suggestions from the audience).
Maybe we sit in the sun? Maybe we turn off our devices
off for a few minutes every day?
Maybe we simply stop, take a deep breath every once in awhile?
Breathing in a spirit of calm and exhaling our stress.

But again we do not want this to become one more
additional thing that you have to do.
Sabbath as Jesus proclaims was made for us
and not the other way around.

It is to be life giving, something that sets you free
and again as Anita put it so well,
"moments where the sacred becomes apparent."
It is something you get to do and not something you have to do.

And when repeated enough times to become a simple habit.
A habit that is truly mind altering.
Something that is truly satisfying.
And that which will truly satisfy the deepest
and most gnawing hunger in your life.
And isn't that what Advent is really all about,
waiting in the dark for God to come and dwell with us?

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