

An invitation to Sabbath  
Deuteronomy 5:12-15, [Mark 2:23-3:6](#)

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Sabbath is a theme in two of our readings today. In the Old Testament reading, we hear that the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, or your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock, or the resident alien in your towns, so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you.

In our gospel reading Jesus and the Pharisees debate the rules of the Sabbath. Should the disciples be allowed to pluck grains of wheat when they are hungry even though it was considered work? Should Jesus heal the withered hand of a man? This was somehow also considered work. Jesus says to the Pharisees, “The Sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath; so the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath.”

All this thinking about Sabbath brought me back to my experience of Sabbath while I was in Jerusalem. It was wonderful and challenging all at the same time. The preparation was exhilarating – people rushing around in the market trying to get done all that needed to be done before 3:30 or 4 pm when everything closes down. When we got back to our hotel in Jerusalem after being out all day, the hotel was suddenly busy with many people: couples, families, and youth groups of Jewish young men with their leaders. Most were really dressed up and there was a sense of urgency to be ready for the Sabbath especially for the women who had to light the Shabbat candles within the 18 min before sundown. I was amazed that the hotel provided the candles. Dinner that evening had much ritual with it. There were blessings of the bread and the wine. It was a celebration. Good food was served and the Sabbath was welcomed in. The next day we were invited to Shabbat services at a variety of synagogues from orthodox to reform. The hotel provided a worship space and at breakfast, but there was no hot oatmeal or omelets as in the past days – just warmed up food and many fresh foods such as salads, smoked fish and much more. About half of the rabbis in our group did not use their cell phones on the Sabbath which made meeting up very difficult for those who were taking some of our group to Shabbat services. It was interesting to hear about their different observances of the Sabbath which made me realize that the conversation that Jesus and the Pharisees were having is still going on.

Taxis were limited as some of us discovered as we made our way to Bethlehem just 7 miles away. One of our group got sick and needed medicine and one of our leaders had to travel across town with very limited taxi service to the one pharmacy whose turn it was to be open for Sabbath. Some of the elevators stopped at every floor so that there was no need to do the work of pressing the button to make it go. Tissues appeared in the bathrooms to avoid tearing toilet paper which is considered by some to be work.

So many rules to observe! Our guide who moved to Israel from the US several years ago described how restricted she felt at first, but then she saw the fruits of the Sabbath rules. I too saw them. Time was made to eat together especially at the Friday meal. Time was

made for worship together. Nothing else needed to be done. Families spent time together which I saw especially in the afternoon as I saw families walking in the street, window shopping past the stores that were closed or perhaps just enjoying a walk together. There was truly a different energy in the city.

I admire the Jewish Sabbath observance. We as Christians are called to Sabbath as well but for most of us it is rare in our lives. Our culture, our society seems to try to wipe out any opportunity for Sabbath with our quest for being busy and efficient – to always be seen to be working hard. There is little opportunity to stop and just be with our families, and to be with God.

However, there was a time not so long ago when Sunday was Sabbath. Who remembers those days? What do you remember?

*Allow time for responses. Stores were closed. Families gathered at grandmother's house for dinner. There weren't so many activities on Sundays from soccer games to birthday parties to brunches.*

So let's look at our Sabbath observance today. Times have changed and as our society has moved away from church going, our calendar events have filled Sundays as well. We can lament this and wring our hands in despair, or we can ask ourselves how do we make our Sabbath? How can we find ways to observe our Sabbath that works for us? I say to you Jesus' words to the Pharisees in our gospel - "The Sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath; so the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath."

We have to search out way to make a Sabbath that works for us – that helps us to slow down. Sabbath is about rest, but it is not just about rest because it is in our slowing down we encounter God and will truly be renewed. When we are charging around all the time with schedules full to the max, it is hard to hear how God is speaking to us. When we are so busy and stressed, it takes away our ability to hear God and be in the presence of God. When I have been on guided weekend retreats, I always remember being told it was ok to sleep. In our rest, we find God.

So know you may be saying – I just can't with this Sabbath thing. I have kids. They have activities. I have work. I commute an hour and a half into work. I have to care for my aging parents. I have so many commitments that there is no space in my life. So again hear Jesus' words "The Sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath; so the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath."

Find your way to Sabbath. And in finding your way to Sabbath, I believe you will open up those opportunities to encounter God and change your life.

- Maybe your Sabbath is taking 5 minutes before you start your car or as you park your car before work to just sit and breathe a prayer or read a meditation.

- Perhaps your Sabbath happens when you take the kids to the park leaving the laundry and all the other chores behind as you sit, watch and glory in the wonderful gift that they are.
- Perhaps your Sabbath is in taking a day or an afternoon or an hour to something you love to do and in that time revel in the thought that God put this passion in you.

We are so busy these day. Our culture invites us to pack as much in as we can and yet God invites us to make space for ourselves and our families so that we can rest and we can be with God. Do not say yes to everything. Pray about the choices that come to you.

In creating your Sabbath, think about what renews you. Make space for that renewal and open your heart to how God may come to you in that space. As Jesus says Sabbath is made for us. Let us welcome it into our lives.