

“Sacred Paths: I - Sabbath”  
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Lent I  
Boy Scout Sunday

Exodus 20:8-11

Luke 4:1-13

Four days ago, a new season of the Christian year began, the season of Lent. Four days ago was Ash Wednesday, and some of us met here for worship to mark the beginning of our Lenten journey. We call it a journey because the season of Lent marks the journey of Jesus from his time in the wilderness after his baptism (which we just heard about in the lesson from Luke), through the time of his earthly ministry, to the time of his brutal death by crucifixion on Good Friday. During Lent, we follow that journey with Jesus, and make a journey of our own - a spiritual journey.

That journey and how we make it is the focus of a new sermon series I'll be offering, which starts today, simply called “Sacred Paths.” The series will focus on ways we can make this spiritual journey through Lent more meaningful, ways in which we will draw closer to God. Over the course of the series (which will continue not next week - because we have a special presentation about the building which was delayed because of snow), we will consider four different sacred paths - and they are sabbath, sacrament, simplicity, and study.

And I need you to know right up front today, that today's topic - sabbath - is without a doubt the hardest one of all for us to tackle. Sabbath. You heard the commandment read from the book of Exodus about Sabbath. We are commanded to keep sabbath, to take time off, to take time to simply be with God. We are commanded to do it.

Yet, I contend, it is a tough thing for us to do in this day and age. We are not a people who wants to stop, let alone slow down. One writer, Monique Parsons, in an article entitled “Sabbath Chic” said, “We're hooked in, signed on, trading, buying, selling, dating, checking email and answering our cell phones around the clock. Take a nap and somebody just might take over your company, steal your girlfriend, or give your job to somebody else.” (On-line, “Sabbath Chic,” Monique Parsons)

She's right, that's what our world looks like today. Instant everything! I

confess that I'm just as into that as everybody else. I was standing by the copy machine the other day lamenting that it was taking too long to do its work. We want everything instantly and we generally get it.

We make phone calls by simply picking up our cell phones and calling or texting - no waiting 'til later. One preacher said, "Remember when red lights gave you a minute just to sit and think? Not any more - not with your cell phone right there in your lap begging you to reach out and touch someone." (On-line, "The Wilderness Exam," Barbara Brown Taylor)

So we drive down the road with our cell phones up to our ears, drive through the bank to the ATM to get some money, drive through the fast food restaurant to get some lunch, send emails to get some answers, keep up with our friends and families by checking out their posts on Facebook. Our schedules are maxed out - just try to get people together for a church meeting - everybody's going in ten different directions at once.

Take a sabbath - when would we fit it in?!!!

I don't know if you've noticed it or not, but this kind of living takes a toll on us. It affects us as individuals - we never get off the treadmill - never let up on the pace we're maintaining.

It affects our families. I read a little story this week about a man who had a typical day of working himself to death, coming home to have dinner with his family, and then was preparing to go to his home office to continue to work. Before he did that, he ran into his son's room to give him a goodnight kiss, but it was too late, the little boy was already asleep. But he leaned down and kissed him anyway, and then turned to leave the room, when he heard his son's little voice whisper, "Do you have to kiss me so fast?"

The pace of life affects us and it affects our families, and it also deeply affects our relationship with God. I wonder if God ever thinks of us, "Do you have to kiss me so fast? Do you have to spend such little time with me?"

You know, believe it or not, Jesus knew what it was like to live a high-pressured life. People were always after him - after him to be near him, after him to be fed, after him to be healed, after him to challenge him. Constantly, the pace of life was intense. When you think about all the places he went, all the people he saw, everything that he did in just three short years of ministry, you know it was pretty intense.

But Jesus found a way to get away, Jesus found a way to have sabbath time.

He just did it. He knew how important it was, so he just did it. As professor Leonard Sweet put it, “Jesus came apart, so he didn’t come apart.” (*The Jesus Prescription for a Healthy Life*, Leonard Sweet, p. 152)

“When the world gets too much for Jesus (he writes), when things get too hectic, Jesus takes off.”

Sometimes, Sweet says, Jesus went off by himself. He did that in today’s Gospel lesson. He went into the wilderness, but other times he went into a garden or up into the mountains, or on a lake. Sometimes he went by himself and sometimes he took others with him. But everywhere that he went, every time that he took time apart, Sweet maintains, Jesus learned something more about himself and about God. “The desert taught Jesus about courage, solitude, limits and inner strength. The mountains taught Jesus about dreams, exhilaration and aspiration. The water taught Jesus about cooperation, softness, trust, and control.” (Ibid.) Every time that Jesus took time, he learned more and grew closer to God.

So why don’t we? Why don’t we stop more, and go apart? Why don’t we take some time to just be? Why do we feel we have to keep going and doing and calling and scheduling? Why?

Well, there are probably a lot of reasons, and as I began to think about them, I have to be honest with you, it made me squirm a bit. I’m as guilty as any one of you when it comes to being busy - so I’m not preaching just to you, but to myself.

Sometimes, truth be told, we don’t slow down because we have this feeling that “if I don’t do it, it won’t get done.” Am I right? There’s not a little arrogance behind that, huh?

And sometimes we don’t slow down because we may not want to experience silence - we’re uncomfortable with it. Who knows what we might discover? Who knows what demons with which we might find ourselves wrestling?

And sometimes we don’t slow down because we are literally afraid of what will happen if we do. Somebody else will work harder, and take my job. Somebody else will get ahead of me. I need to keep up this pace so I don’t lose my health benefits. I need to look like the perfect wife/husband, father/mother, employee. You get the picture.

And when we don’t slow down in any or all of these ways, we have forgotten something really important. We have forgotten that we are more than what we do. We have forgotten that we are beloved children of God, and don’t have to prove anything to anyone about ourselves by working, producing, going, going, going.

We have forgotten that we are loved and worthy simply because we are children of God.

Joseph Campbell was once interviewed on PBS by Bill Moyers, and he commented that most of his friends were living what he called “wasteland lives.” He said that “they are just baffled, they’re wandering in the wasteland without any sense of where the water is - the Source that makes things green.” (Sweet, p. 189)

It can happen so easily, if we don’t take time - sabbath time - time away, time apart, time with God. There’s an old Jewish prayer that goes something like this: “Days pass, years vanish, and we walk sightless among miracles.” (On-line, “Sabbath Chic,” Monique Parsons)

Let that not be said of us. Let us embrace this invitation to observe Sabbath during this season of Lent. Jesus invites us to take time, to come apart, to stop for a while. The world will not stop spinning, people will not think less of you, and if they do, it’s their problem, not your’s. Voice mails will keep the important messages for you; Facebook isn’t going anywhere; I doubt if every single piece of clothing in your house needs to be washed, so they can find something to wear - you get the picture.

Find time for God this Lenten season. Find time for you and God this Lenten season. Take time apart, even if it’s just a little time. If you’ve not been in the habit, start slowly. Don’t be afraid to put “time apart” on your schedule - actually write it in there, like an appointment with God, and then don’t break it for anything else. If you have to, set the alarm on your watch or cell phone - oh, it’s time for sabbath - me and God, nothing else. Go for a walk, sit and look at God’s beautiful creation, read the Bible or some devotional material, listen to music. Spend time with those you love, not getting tasks done, just being together. Lay down next to your child, instead of offering a quick kiss goodnight. Take part in one of the Lenten studies. Go on the Men’s Retreat.

Jesus was convinced that anytime he took time away, he grew closer to God, and so shall we.

I want to close with one more Leonard Sweet story. For a time, he was dean of a United Methodist seminary in Ohio. For that position, of course, he was called to do a lot of fund raising. One of the men who taught him about fund raising, a man named Robert Nelson, lived in Chicago and belonged to the Union League Club of Chicago. So many times Len would meet him there. He loved it there, and found it a great place to get work done.

One day Len and Robert were meeting, and Robert told Len to go over to one

of the phone booths and make a call to a prospective donor. So Len walked over, and not too long later, he came back to Robert, obviously frustrated. He hadn't been able to get the light on in the phone booth. He couldn't figure out how to do it, there was no switch and it was too dark to see anything without a light. He got himself pretty worked up over it - he had a lot of work to do, a lot of money to raise, he didn't have time for this!! So, exasperated, he came back and asked Robert - "How do I turn the blasted light on?"

"You're the head of a seminary?" Nelson muttered in obvious delight. "Did you ever try closing the door?"

Sure enough, when Len closed the door of the phone booth, the light came on. And you know what? He learned a valuable lesson from that experience, one which I think will help us too. He wrote, "Lights don't come on unless you first shut some doors. Life doesn't come into focus unless you first stop. If your life doesn't have an 'off' switch, it will never turn on." (Sweet, p. 189)

Wow, he's right, you know. To know God, to know yourself, to know life, real, true, abundant life, sometimes you have to stop, have Sabbath. I invite you to do that in these weeks of Lent. May it be so.

Amen.