

Unwrapping the Gift Called Sabbath

Exodus 16

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Our story from Exodus is a story of contrasts: life in the bondage of the empire versus life in the freedom of the wilderness. The people of Israel had been living in the Egyptian empire where they cried out for release from bondage. God had seen their misery, had compassion on their sufferings, and under the leadership of Moses, had delivered them from the power of the empire. Now they were on their way to the promised land, that land flowing with milk and honey, but in between bondage and blessing lay the wilderness. And when they got there, the people complained against Moses and Aaron, his brother:

If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill the whole assembly with hunger.

Life in the empire had been harsh. It was competitive. There was always someone who could make bricks faster than you could, putting pressure on you, showing you up before the boss. Life was coercive. You had to meet your quotas. Your time was not your own. You had to show up before the master came in, and you didn't dare leave before he went home. It all added up to constant anxiety: you had to keep producing, you had to succeed, you had to look good. You never knew when the master was watching. But you knew where your bread came from. If you did what the empire required, you got fed. At times, you might wonder, Is this all there is? But it was the only kind of bread you knew, so you did what you had to do to keep it coming.

The new life in the wilderness was free. There was no competition. Everyone was on the same side. There were no quotas. Your time was your own. And there was no master spying on your productivity, nobody telling you what to do. No one reminding you that if you didn't work overtime, someone else might get ahead. No advertisers urging you to stretch a little farther so that you could have the newest stuff. No little voice whispering, "If you don't get that phone call, you might miss something." In the wilderness, life was free and open, without competition, and non-coercive. But there was one question: Is there anything to live on? We didn't like the rules of the empire, but is there any other way to get fed?

Then the Lord said to Moses, "I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day."

Then Moses said to Aaron, "Say to the whole congregation of the Israelites, 'Draw near to the Lord, for he has heard your complaining.'" And as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the Israelites, they looked toward the wilderness, and the glory of the Lord appeared in the cloud.

When the people stopped fixating on Egypt and turned toward the wilderness, that

barren, empty place where they assumed there was nothing to live on, lo and behold, they saw the glory of the Lord. They saw that all of the glory was not back in Egypt and all of the bread was not in the empire:

In the evening quails came up and covered the camp; and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. When the layer of dew lifted, there on the surface of the wilderness was a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground. When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another, “What is it?” And Moses said, “It is the bread that the Lord has given you to eat.”

They had been living by the empire’s rules for so many years, eating the empire’s bread for so long, that when they saw God’s bread, they didn’t recognize it. “What is it?” they said. In Hebrew, “Manna.” So that’s what they called it: “What is it?” bread. In time, they learned that they could depend on this “what is it?” bread. And they discovered that wilderness is God’s prime territory for teaching us that God’s bread is enough.

I have suggested that this is a story of the contrast between life in the empire and life in the wilderness. But only at the beginning. For by the end, it becomes a story about the institution of the Sabbath. “On the sixth day they gathered twice as much food.” And Moses said to them,

“This is what the Lord has commanded: ‘Tomorrow is a day of solemn rest, a holy Sabbath to the Lord; bake what you want to bake and boil what you want to boil, and all that is left over put aside to be kept until morning.’” So they put it aside until morning, as Moses commanded; and it did not become foul, and there were no worms in it. Moses said, “Eat it today, for today is a Sabbath to the Lord; today you will not find it in the field.”

And the Lord said to Moses, “See! the Lord has given you the Sabbath, therefore on the sixth day he gives you food for two days; each of you stay where you are, do not leave your place on the seventh day.” So the people rested on the seventh day.

Ultimately, this is a story about Sabbath. Sabbath is the seventh day of the week which God has appointed for rest. Sabbath is wilderness time. Sabbath is time for withdrawing from the empire in order to remember that the true bread comes from God and that God willingly provides it, more than enough to live on, more than enough to share: “those who gathered much had nothing over, and those who gathered little had no shortage.”

Now, if we are going to understand what scripture says about Sabbath, we may first have to let go of all that we think we know. For many, the notion of Sabbath is associated with harsh rules and deprivation. Some remember that in their childhood, Sabbath meant that you didn’t even dare *think* about enjoying yourself. If one of these notions is running around inside your head, I would suggest that you throw it out and treat this as a totally new subject. For Sabbath is first of all about the freedom to enjoy God. Sabbath is about enjoying the free space which God gives us, space for remembering that God provides all that we need, and more.

Sabbath is a gift. Not a burden. It is a gift of time free from the empire's competitiveness and coercion and manipulation and exploitation and abuse and anxiousness. Sabbath is time for play — true play, the kind by which a child enjoys the world without anxiety. The rabbis taught that Sabbath was an appropriate day for married couples to make love. For many of us, our play has become work. We used to say, "I play tennis." Now we say, "I'm working on my backhand." Sabbath is God's gift of time, a foretaste of heaven.

A recent survey revealed that the greatest stress on families is not the threat of alcohol or drugs or the danger of crime. It is the lack of time, time to be together, time to enjoy one another.

When we moved to McLean some years back, we moved in on a day in December. There was much to be done getting started in a new job, getting settled in a new house, getting the children used to new schools, getting ready for Christmas. Somehow there just wasn't time to get to know our new neighbors. Then in the middle of February, we were hit with a massive snowstorm that shut down the city, and everything stopped. Suddenly, there was time to get acquainted, time to work together clearing the street for the doctor who had to get out, time to sit and drink cocoa and talk. The snowstorm changed the quality of time. Whereas time had been busy and frantic and full, time was now open and available and free. Like life in the wilderness. We couldn't work and, lo and behold, we were still fed.

The purpose of Sabbath is to purposefully, intentionally give ourselves that kind of time. It won't be done for us. We can't count on a snowstorm every week. And we can no longer depend on our society to do it for us. Some of us can remember longingly the days when nothing was open on Sundays. There was little competition for our attention. But those days are over, and it appears unlikely that they will be coming back. Church is no longer the only game in town. The empire is too addicted to productivity and consumption to willingly give us a break. We have to take the responsibility to structure Sabbath time for ourselves. We have to set boundaries to keep the empire from co-opting every minute.

One of the things that I notice about our story from Exodus, is that it is filled with boundary-setting. The people can gather only so much manna for five days, twice as much on the sixth day, none on the seventh. And the consequence of not observing the boundaries? "Some left part of it until morning and it bred worms and became foul." Ignoring the boundaries opens the door to chaos — to decay and disintegration. In a word, life "stinks!"

Sabbath observance is more than an act of purity. It is an active way of putting boundaries around the forces that threaten life with disintegration. Sabbath keeping not only puts a boundary around work. It also puts a boundary around worry. We withdraw from activities that inspire anxiety. And in our culture today, I would suggest that sabbath also needs to include a withdrawal from media — movies and especially television. These media are one of the empire's chief tools for shaping us by the empire's values. We need to withdraw from that "alternative liturgy" in order to give room for God's Word and Spirit to operate. The image-based media are imperializing — they take over all available space. Sabbath observance sets boundaries which give God room to operate.

Sundays can bring an experience of that free and open space in which God can meet with us. And in that different kind of time, that Sabbath time, we enjoy God and

are reminded that God's provision is enough. We put some boundaries around the acquisitive, addictive, competitive, anxious striving in which we are immersed all the other days. And we enjoy a different way of being and a different way of meeting with God and with one another. And maybe over time, we become a little more able to re-enter our work with less anxiousness, and with a greater readiness to look for God in the daily and to be truly present to everyone we meet.

Recently I participated in a workshop on Sabbath keeping. At our final meeting, one of the women handed out little wrapped gift boxes. She said that she had been most impressed by the image of Sabbath as a gift of God, waiting to be unwrapped. So she had prepared these gifts for us to take home and keep on our desks, or wherever we have our daily worship, as a reminder that Sabbath is God's gift. And so I invite you to join in receiving and unwrapping this precious gift which God has placed into our hands.