

Postcards from the Edge of the Promised Land

“Time-Outs”

[Exodus 20:8-11](#)

The writer of our *postcards from the edge of the promised land* has stopped to linger for a day or two at the base of Mt. Sinai, where Moses heard and wrote down the Ten Commandments. Ten simple instructions that ever since, people have believed could regulate human behavior and in fact most of civil society. Not too many years ago, we had big fights in this country, going all the way up to the Supreme Court, about whether the Ten Commandments should be placed on walls in courtrooms and schools, as if they were the law of this country. The magic of the Ten Commandments, I think, is that they seem to tell people exactly what to do, how to behave. In a complicated world, where so many things we wish were black and white seem to be tinged with gray, we long for some clarity, some rule of thumb that will make order out of chaos. The Ten Commandments seem to offer that.

Today I want to focus on just one of those commandments: the fourth one. *Remember the Sabbath, it says, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but on the seventh day you shall not do any work—not you, or your children, or the people who work for you, or the strangers who live in your community. No work.*

That’s pretty clear. The language is no less fuzzy than “You shall not kill” or “You shall not steal.” This doesn’t read like an optional suggestion for a happier, more prosperous lifestyle. It has teeth, like a commandment. Why would God insist on this rule that we treat like a luxury we cannot afford? A law that—if we actually followed it—would reduce our productivity? Who does it hurt, if people want to keep working all the time?

The idea of resting regularly—every seventh day—goes all the way back to the story of creation. God too rested on the seventh day. After six days of big, creative work—separating dark and light, land from sea, creating plants and animals and fish and birds and finally humans—God stopped. On the seventh day, God did not show up to tinker with his creation or perfect the first draft. God did not come back and check to make sure everything was working. God stopped and rested.

In the Exodus story, that pattern of no work on the seventh day shows up even before the commandments are delivered. Out in the wilderness, when the people were hungry, God made sure that food appeared for them every day. Enough for one day alone; if they tried to save leftovers or store up extra food, it turned rancid, inedible. “Give us *this day* our daily bread” Jesus prayed, because this was the pattern set by God out in the wilderness: enough for one day at a time. Except that on the sixth day, there was enough food—*manna*—for two days, so that there would be no work—not even gathering up food—on the Sabbath, the seventh day.

And then, from Mt. Sinai, comes this fourth commandment: *Remember the Sabbath, and keep it holy.* Interestingly, this is the longest commandment, the most detailed: *not you or your children or your slaves or anyone else whose work schedule you might control.*

In the sequence of the ten laws, this one appears right in the middle. At the hinge between the first three, which are about what loyalty to God requires, and the final six, which are all about how to treat your neighbor:

- Do not dishonor your father and mother;
- Do not kill;
- Do not commit adultery;
- Do not steal;
- Do not lie;
- Do not covet—envy—what your neighbor has.

The placement of the Sabbath commandment is important. Here's why. God knew, I think, that a pattern of regular rest is critical to the way we behave. Without it, we humans will absorb the anxiety of the system we're caught up in. We'll do the opposite of what the rest of those commandments instruct. If we live in a system of endless production and work,

- We will dishonor not only our parents but every person who we deem not sufficiently productive.
- We will engage in violence against people whose agenda gets in our way.
- We will let sexual interaction become something that exploits people.
- We will take what we want from others.
- We will distort the truth to gain an advantage.
- We will be committed to acquiring everything we can.

It's not that hard to see evidence of that anxiety—more, more, faster, faster, don't stop—today, in this place, around us. We lament the ways worry about being left behind infects even our children. But anxiety about producing more has always been part of being human. It was there in Egypt, all those thousands of years ago. The slavery of the Hebrew people was enslavement to the grind of endless productivity. More bricks. More pyramids. More wealth. When God said to Moses, "I see the suffering of my people," it was about their fatigue, their despair. They saw no escape from the endless cycle of work. That's what slavery is: not being able to put limits on your own work.

If you've spent much of your life in church—or even in a therapist's office—you have heard before the admonition to rest, to take time off. The idea of a weekly Sabbath—a day set aside from the work of the rest of the week—is not a new idea. And I bet every one of us would say that it's a *good* idea, that we would do it if we possibly could. We just *can't*.

Or maybe we just *don't*.

I don't think God has one bit of interest in arguing with you about this. I don't think you need to hear today one more harangue about not shopping, or doing laundry, or firing up your computer on Sundays.

I want to suggest to you this morning that obedience to the fourth commandment—remembering and keeping holy a regular pattern of rest—is something you can take seriously even if you can't

manage a day that feels like Sabbath. That maybe Sabbath is a *stance* you take in your life, in the world.

The Jewish theologian Abraham Heschel called the Sabbath “a palace in time”. It’s a way of finding in your life some space, an openness. That’s what holiness is: a window through which we can see the presence of God. We think of holy places, but Heschel says the first holy thing God created was time. A holy space in time.

As good as our work might be, we cannot open up space for God while we are busy working. Sabbath is about standing aside, setting aside our own work as creators so that we remember that we are also *creation*. It means regularly, even briefly, letting life act on us, rather than trying to construct and re-construct the world around us. This does not mean *Live passively*. It means *You do not always have to be in charge—even of your own life*. Deeply buried in the practice of Sabbath is a trust that we are not indispensable, that the world is able to operate as it should without us constantly, anxiously, making additions. Trusting that we are not alone responsible, even for our own well-being. That when we stop and rest, things will not fall apart.

God urges us—you and me—to find and to keep some *practice* of sabbath. Barbara Brown Taylor calls this the spiritual practice of saying no.

“No, I want to stay home tonight.”

“No, I have enough work for now.”

“No, I have all the possessions I can take care of.”

Make a choice. To slow down. To go outside and look at the stars for a few minutes before you go to bed. To regularly do one thing that you know is life-giving but you think you don’t have time for. It doesn’t matter whether you are retired or just starting out. The need is the same. Do it because this—rest—is part of the pattern of creation. And if we don’t let ourselves be part of that pattern, we become destroyers of creation, and of our own humanity.

I want to show you a clip from British television—a show called *Britain’s Got Talent*—sort of an American Idol-type thing. It’s from this last season: a singing group called the *Missing People Choir*, from a non-profit group whose work is critical: to keep looking—never stop looking—for children who have gotten lost or gone missing.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b4RIOiVJjCo>

(see Youtube - Missing People Choir, Auditions Week 1)

Just this week, one of the children whose picture flashed on that screen above those singers’ heads was found. Even for the work that feels most urgent, so important to keep alive and not let die even for a minute, sometimes what matters is to stop, and simply to sing. To let the universe—the universe that has a good and loving God at its center—do its work.

Because it will.

Welcoming the Sabbath - from the Jewish Union Prayer Book

In the silence of our praying place we close the door upon the hectic joys and fears, the accomplishments and anguish of the week we have left behind.

What was but moments ago the substance of our life has become memory; what we did must now be woven into what we are.

On this day we shall not do, but be.

We are to walk the path of our humanity, no longer ride unseeing through a world we do not touch and only vaguely sense.

No longer can we tear the world apart to make our fire.

On this day heat and warmth and light must come from deep within ourselves.

Resources for this sermon:

Walter Brueggemann, *Sabbath as Resistance*, Westminster John Knox Press, 2014

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *Covenant & Conversation, Exodus: The Book of Redemption*, Maggid Books and The Orthodox Union, 2010

Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Altar in the World*, HarperOne, 2009

Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, *The Particulars of Rapture: Reflections on Exodus*, Schocken Books, 2001