

Pastor Jonna Bohigian
Created for Rest
Genesis 1:26 – 27, 1:31 – 2:3

In our polarized, frenetic, and crazy-busy society, we need reminders of how life was created to be, of how *we* were created to be as human beings. And we need *hope* that it won't *always* be this way. So we go back to the beginning, to explore the story of creation in the book of Genesis. Last week, we explored how we were created to care for creation, and this week, we explore how we were created for rest.

In recent years, the subject of rest has received a lot of attention in the United States. Getting sufficient sleep, taking breaks during the day, utilizing your full vacation, doing what you enjoy, maintaining relationships, practicing mindfulness, meditation, and yoga have become strong encouragements from employers and schools. Some employers and schools even offer opportunities and resources to practice this rest during the day.

Rest has received a lot of attention, because *stress* has become a real concern in our society. In the United States, above any other cause of death is Cardiac Disease, and the greatest link to Cardiac Disease is stress.¹ And young people are not immune to the effects of stress either. In the Silicon Valley, suicide ideation, severe depression, and other mental health issues have *skyrocketed* and become serious problems among high school students.

According to Sameera Khan in *Affinity Magazine*, there is no simple answer to determine the cause of these mental health concerns, but she suggests that they are stress-related. She reminds us that in 2009 at Gunn High School in Palo Alto, five students within nine months committed suicide, and forty-two had been “hospitalized or treated for significant suicide ideation.” When asked why, students responded that the “academic

¹ Marva Dawn, *The Sense of the Call*, 68.

rigor of schoolwork, pressure from successful parents and excess of extracurricular activities” were reasons.²

We see what’s happening around us and within us, and we *know* that this is not how it’s supposed to be. We know that it’s not supposed to be this way, when young people don’t want to live – and when we don’t want to, or can’t, live either. We feel it, deep within our *bones*, that we *need rest*.

The truth is, human beings were *created for rest*. In Genesis 1:26 - 27, man and woman are created. They are the crown, the pinnacle of creation, after which God looks at all that He has created and it is “*very good*.” Man and woman are created, and what is it that they do on their first full day of life? (pause) They *rest*.

Genesis 2:2 – 3 says, “And on the seventh day God finished His work that He had done, and He *rested* on the seventh day from all His work that He had done. So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God *rested* from all His work that He had done in creation.”

As you hear this, whether you have been a Christian for a while or are still exploring the faith, the notion of God resting might be confusing. *Why would God need to rest, we wonder, if He is all-powerful? Could God have exhausted Himself in order to need rest?*

What will perhaps help with our question is a word study of *rest* and looking again at its context in Genesis. The Hebrew word for *rest* is *Shabbat*, or *Sabbath*. Sabbath means to “cease, desist, or rest.”³ *Rest* placed alongside *cease* and *desist* causes us to consider that *Sabbath* is not *reactionary*; it is *proactive* and *intentional*. Genesis 2:2 says that on the

² <http://affinitymagazine.us/2017/04/14/stress-and-suicide-the-disturbing-academic-pressure-on-silicon-valley-teens/>

³ <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lang/Lexicon/Lexicon.cfm?strongs=H7673&t=KJV>

seventh day, God finishes His creative work, and He Sabbaths. Verse 3 then says that because God Sabbaths from all His creative work, He blesses the seventh day and makes it holy. God's Sabbath is therefore not created to regain His strength after a lot of work; it is a sign of His pleasure with creation. His creation is "very good," so He creates one more thing – a day of ceasing, of resting.

The seventh day is unique to creation. God calls *this* day "holy." He sets it apart for His purposes. *Time*, not space or any other thing, is made holy, set apart for God's purposes.⁴

In the Old Testament, God's people are commanded to keep the Sabbath holy. In Exodus 20, God's people are reminded that because God Sabbaths on the seventh day and makes it holy, God's people are to keep the Sabbath holy. Maybe you remember the Third Commandment from Confirmation class. "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates." Why? "For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested, [ceased], the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy" (Ex 20:9 – 11). In Exodus 24, God commands the people to keep the Sabbath as a sign of God's covenant with them. In Deuteronomy 5, God's people are commanded to keep the Sabbath holy because they are no longer slaves. "Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God...You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and that the LORD your God

⁴ Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament, 902.

brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day” (Deut 5:13 – 15).

As Lutheran Christians, we have largely disregarded the command to keep the Sabbath. We memorize the Third Commandment in Confirmation and forget it just as soon as we memorize it, because it doesn't seem relevant to our lives. We memorize it as a command of God but don't see many around us who actually practice or keep the Sabbath. We also have a difficult time fitting God's commands into our theology. We know that we are saved by grace through faith. We know that there is nothing that we can do to save ourselves; salvation is a gift of God through Jesus Christ (Eph 2:8). But we often stop there. We have a difficult time seeing that obedience to God plays a part in our life of faith. As James writes, “Faith without works is dead” (Jas 2:17). Or, as Ephesians 2:10 says, “For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus *for* good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.” *Faith without works is dead. Created for good works.*

Obedience is *hard*. We are sinners, inclined to pursue our own interests, rather than the commands of Jesus or service to others. But obedience to Jesus is a necessary part of following him; obedience is a necessary part of being his disciple. As Jesus says in John 14:15, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments.”

It is amazing to consider that resting, or keeping the Sabbath, is a command we don't want to obey. One might think that resting would be the *easiest* of all the commands to obey. But in our culture, it is most likely the most *difficult* of the commands. To keep the Sabbath means to discipline ourselves to relegate work to six days, and on the seventh, to cease all work. To keep the Sabbath means to end the rat race, the competition to be the

best, the smartest, the most accomplished, the hardest working. To keep the Sabbath means to stop striving and to simply *be*, to rest in the love of God, and to worship Him.

The first commitment I made when I came to St. Timothy's was to have a Sabbath day. I had grown to understand that this was a central component of being a follower of Jesus, but I had never practiced keeping a Sabbath. Within a few weeks of being at St. Tim's, I realized that keeping a Sabbath day would be *critical* to my health and sustainability in ministry. I struggled to put myself out of commission for one whole day, not to *produce* anything, not to be seen as the hardest working person. My husband, Alek, and I talked about this struggle not a few times. It seemed to go against my very nature not to produce something, not to do something, some errand, which would make my life easier in the future. It was a great struggle, and it *still* is, and this is in part why I know deep within myself that it is critical. I have learned to recognize that when I do not cease, when I do not rest, I am more irritable, exhausted, controlling, frustrated, self-serving, less creative, and less hopeful. I don't have the clarity to see with a greater perspective or to help others as God is calling me to. I forget who I am and who God is.

This is the core of Sabbath keeping, of resting. Human beings were created to rest so that we remember who *we* are and so that we remember who *God* is. Without frequent reminders and designated time, we forget. Without intentional time sitting in the presence of God, worshipping with other believers, and waiting in the silence, we quickly believe that God must not be at work, that this is all there is to life, and we despair. Without ceasing, we easily think that life is what we make it, that everything is dependent on our efforts, that we are what we do.

But friends, we are *not* what we do, what we accomplish, how we have failed, or what our family history has to say about us. You and I and *all* human beings were created from the love and pleasure of God. When you and I were created, God saw that it was “very good.” You are not a mistake, and neither is your neighbor. You were created, and created to rest, to cease striving for personal gain or comfort, to be wholly in the presence of God.

Theologian Marva Dawn offers some questions to spur our imagination in keeping the Sabbath. What is it that “brings you grace best? (pause) What teaches you that you are loved in spite of yourself? (pause) What people or activities or objects might you enjoy on your next Sabbath day to enfold you in the LORD’s lavish steadfast love?”⁵ (pause)

For the parent of young children, keeping the Sabbath or even resting for a few *minutes* might seem like a complete *joke*. Though this is likely much more difficult, it is not impossible.

Marva Dawn writes about an encouragement she once offered to a mother. A mother in the first congregation she served complained “that she could never find time for her devotional life because her three-year-old son always interfered. [Dawn] suggested...that she might enlist him to protect her – never realizing how useful that would turn out to be. Several weeks later [Dawn] arrived at her house one morning to talk with her about a choir matter and was met by that son. ‘Shhhhhh. You *can’t* talk. It’s Mommy’s *quiet* time. But you can watch ‘Sesame Street’ with me.’ Resolutely, he took [her] hand and firmly led [her] into the family room where he motioned [her] to sit on the floor. Then he spread his legs a bit to assume a vigilant posture and proceeded to stand guard over [her].

⁵ Dawn, *Keeping the Sabbath Wholly*, 46.

When 'Sesame Street' ended, he said, 'Now you can talk with her' and ran to get his mother."⁶

In this life, we will experience glimpses of this rest, this joy in the presence of God. Though we see through a mirror dimly (1 Cor 13:12), we continue to pursue this rest as a sign and as a foretaste of the feast to come. For in our rest, "we seek God's presence and look forward to the day when Jesus will come again and take us home to celebrate the Sabbath eternally with him."⁷ One day, we will be fully in the presence of God, no longer separated by our sin, and bow before the throne of Jesus and worship him with all believers, singing, "Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!" (Rev 4:8b). Amen.

⁶ Dawn, *The Sense of the Call*, 53 – 54.

⁷ Marva Dawn, *Keeping the Sabbath Wholly*, 157.