

## **Sabbath is a Story**

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Genesis 1:31-2:3; Matthew 11:28-30

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Imagine with me for a few minutes. The year is 586 BC, and you are a middle class, educated Israelite: a government scribe, or an artisan. But the unthinkable has happened. Jerusalem—your home—has been destroyed—burned to the ground after a long siege by the Babylonians. You have been force-marched all the way to Babylon—two months of walking, up north into modern day Syria, then down along the Euphrates river into modern day Iraq. After all that, you reach the huge, elaborate, intimidating Ishtar gate of Babylon, seemingly designed to show you how much stronger Babylon is than your little home town, you are put to work, conscripted to use your skills for the empire. You always wanted to use your education, your artistry to do creative, beautiful things for your people and for your God, but here we are. Life is not as you planned.

Ever since you arrived in Babylon, you've been hearing the story of Marduk, the Babylonian god. After all, Marduk seems to have won, doesn't he? The people who worship Marduk utterly defeated the people who worship Yahweh, which must mean Marduk is stronger, better, more real. And this is the story of Marduk: out of the chaos and infighting of many gods, Marduk fought and killed and emerged as the strongest. And from the carcass of the goddess he had defeated, Marduk created the world, and then created humans as slaves of the gods to do their grunt work, so that the gods might rest.

Day in and day out, you think about this story as you transcribe the texts of the empire, working for the man. You've become a cog in a machine you never wanted to live in, and it's hard not to wonder if the story they're telling is true.

But once a week, early in the morning before you have to report to work, you gather with your Sabbath community, the exiled people, worshippers of Yahweh. You gather to tell a different story. The story of a God who created the world from nothing and then looked on that creation and said, "Oh how exceedingly good. We have done good work. Now *with* the whole creation, let's rest and enjoy it."

What a different story that is than the story of Marduk that's breathing down your neck. The Marduk story says you belong to a weak and inferior people; the Sabbath story says you are exceedingly good. The Marduk story says you're only good enough to keep around if you produce enough to show your worth by your work; the Sabbath story claims that you have a value beyond what you produce. So you cling to the Sabbath story and the Sabbath community. You keep telling the story. And during this time in Babylon, this story of creation, goodness, and rest comes into its written form.

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Now, I asked you to imagine yourself in 586 BC, but I could go back and make the same point even if I changed a few details. I could change Marduk to Pharaoh, Babylon to Egypt and talk about how Pharaoh only cared about the bottom line of making bricks for the empire, but the Sabbath story tells you that God cares for you beyond the bricks you make, cares enough to give you rest.

I could change Babylon to Rome in time of Jesus. Jesus speaks to those who are burdened with the unending slog to make ends meet in an empire that piles on the taxes, in a religious institution that is complicit with the empire, laying more rules and taxes on you without caring for your well-being. But Jesus beckons disciples to follow him into a rhythm of life that will lighten the load, allow for their souls to rest.

And yes, I could change Babylon to Washington DC, the seat of imperial power in today's world. Washington also tells the story of work, efficiency, production, power. Washington measures our worth by what we do, how much influence we have. There's a story deep in the American tradition that says we need to work, work, work. We need to work ourselves out of poverty and work our country out of moral defect. Even those of us who see the flaw in that story have parts of it deep inside of us.

And all of this is why we need the story of Sabbath.

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Probably, though, when I say the word Sabbath, many of you don't think of beauty and delight and rest from oppression.

Possibly, you think of an antiquated biblical commandment. You think of blue laws, of states where you can't buy alcohol on Sundays, of childhoods in which the movie theaters were closed, of starched clothes and Sunday best and a dictum "keep the Sabbath day holy," which might be translated in your head as "don't have any fun on Sundays."

Or possibly, you think of an impractical, out-of-touch idea about the world. Resting once a week sounds nice, but when you have children, a job, volunteer commitments, colleges to get into, career advancement to consider, houses and yards to maintain—you simply can't afford a whole day of rest. You'll catch a breath when you next get a chance, which sometimes just means the next time you get sick and are *forced* to rest.

So let's not start with commands and rules and practicalities. Let's start with a story.

To start with a Sabbath story is to remember that when God created the world, God looked at everything God had made and said, "Wow. This is very good." Full stop. We were very good to God *before* any work had been done, simply because we exist. We are very good to God *before* we get up in the morning and fuel up with coffee and do all the things. To start with a Sabbath story is to remember that Jesus said to all who would be his disciples, "stop with the heavy burdens and the running around meeting all the demands of the empire! The way of life I am calling you to is light, is joyful, has a rhythm. The way of life I am calling you to will give you rest for your souls."

And to start with a Sabbath story is also to explore your story, and mine. What's your rhythm? When do you work? How do you rest? Is your rhythm lifegiving, or oppressive?

What's your story? Some of us work extra long hours at our paying job and struggle to keep up with external demands for billable hours and documentation, or internal demands to be the best we can be for our country or our client or our patient.

Some of us pride ourselves on having a good balance between job and our family, but the truth is that whether we're at work or at home, we're still running around with a constant to-do list in our heads.

Some of us are full-time parents or full-time volunteers, and even though we don't have a boss telling us what work to do, we're still always wondering how we can fit enough hours in the day; pausing is not an option with small children.

Some of us have flexible schedules and don't feel we deserve a day of rest every week, because on the 6 week days we haven't accomplished as much as we should have.

Some of us are students, constantly told that our grades and our activities and our papers and our resumes need to measure up so that we can make it to college or grad school or get that job.

If we're honest, most of us believe some version of the story of Marduk. We act as though we were put on this earth by a god who only cares about the grunt work we can accomplish. We act as though we are cogs in the machine and we just have to keep running without stopping to think, stopping to be. It can seem impossible, or legalistic, or prudish to stop.

Here's my own confession. I don't know how to stop working. Sometimes it's because staying in motion keeps me feeling some control. Sometimes it's because I don't believe that the world could keep going without me. Sometimes it's because I'm somewhere deep down worried that if I don't keep doing ALL THE THINGS, I won't have measured up to being a follower of Christ. Sometimes it's because I just read the newspaper and how in the world could I take a *break* when there are sick children without medicine in cages funded by my tax dollars, and South Sudan is on the brink of famine, and I'm already not doing enough, and how can I prioritize my own "spiritual health" or "self-care" above the lives of others?

But this is broken thinking. This is arrogance. The world in fact can keep spinning while I take a break, and God did not create me just to do the grunt work of the world. God absolutely did create me to be a part of healing and wholeness in the world. But that can't be accomplished through the same work-work-work mentality that drives empire. Staying up later won't end the hunger. Perhaps God cares more about *who we are becoming* rather than *how much we can accomplish in a week*. Perhaps God knows better than we, that a healthy rhythm of work and rest is what equips us for the creative thinking and living we need, to be real agents of change in the world.

There's an old legend—a kind of Christian version of the tortoise and the hare—about a pioneer wagon train on the way from St. Louis to Oregon.<sup>1</sup> Good Christians that they were, the group stopped to rest every Sunday. But winter was coming and some were anxious about arriving on time, so they suggested the group travel all seven days a week. The caravan could not agree, so half of them continued with their rhythm of six days' travel, one day's rest. The other half began to travel every day of the week. Guess which one arrived first? The one that kept the Sabbath, of course. The breaks had energized them for the journey.

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<sup>1</sup> Marva J. Dawn, *Keeping the Sabbath Wholly* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 65.

So even though this little tale seems to fit perfectly into a defense of Sabbath, and even though there's a logic to it, I rather despise this story. It implies that Sabbath exists in order to make us more productive, that the point of rest is to equip us to enter the race again.

And that's not the story of Sabbath. I think if I were rewriting this story, I'd tell it more like this: half of the caravan began to travel every day of the week, and they made it to Oregon in exactly 63 days and gave themselves a gold star. But the other half arrived just two days later, overflowing with joyful stories. They shared about the beautiful mountains they'd seen, and how in their worship they'd written a new song about it. They told about the time they'd been paused along a stream when a migrant family wandered up and begged for food, and they had enough to share. They explained that in their time of prayer together one Sunday, they'd felt a pull to set up a hospital in Oregon for anyone who was sick or injured. In other words, Sabbath *had* slowed them down a *tiny bit*, but not enough to cause a problem. And meanwhile, it had opened up a generative and creative space for them to encounter God, find joy, and grow as a community in service to the world.

Would you be willing to explore what Sabbath might look like in our lives today? It doesn't have to be legalistic. It doesn't have to be Sunday, or Saturday, or any 24-hr period exactly. It might not start with a bunch of things we say "no" to on Sunday, but rather with a question of what we want to say "yes" to. One writer on Sabbath shares her fond memories of childhood Sunday, a day set apart for special activities like pancakes instead of the usual weekday oatmeal,<sup>2</sup> hikes in the woods to see the fall colors,<sup>3</sup> and inviting friends over for hot dogs cooked by the fireplace—a simple meal that felt like a treat.<sup>4</sup>

Opening a time of intentional rest each week can create lifegiving spaces. When I was a college student caught in the thick of stress about studies and papers and everything else, a wise mentor suggested I observe a Sabbath during Lent. I still remember the second week of Lent that year, when I had spent much of Saturday evening to finish my homework, so that I could rest entirely on Sunday. *This feels dumb*, I found myself thinking. *I gave up time I could have spent with friends just to stick to a rule*. But my tune changed when late that Sunday afternoon, my roommate got a call from her mom. Her cousin had died suddenly in a car crash. She was beside herself. She couldn't concentrate on studies, but didn't want to be alone. And thanks be to God, I had the time and space just to be with her that evening. Since that day, I've had my ups and downs with Sabbath keeping, but I've never stopped believing that God invites us into a rhythm of rest for a reason. It is a gift to us, to remember that work doesn't define us. And it's a gift to the world, because it creates space and availability for relationships, for presence, for love.

May God open our eyes and hearts to this gift, as we continue to explore it in the weeks ahead.

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<sup>2</sup> Dawn, *Keeping the Sabbath Wholly*, 183.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 177.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.