

Restoring Perspective
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July 14, 2019

Exodus 20: 8-11; Matthew 6: 25-33

Twenty-four years since it was last published, I still deeply miss Bill Watterson's wonderful comic strip, Calvin and Hobbes, about a young boy (Calvin) and his tiger (Hobbes), who is stuffed or imaginary to everyone else, but real as real can be to Calvin. The strip could be funny, at times sentimental, sometimes wickedly cynical or deeply philosophical.

Watterson could make the reader think more with five or six cartoon panels than five or six hours of typical television programming elicits. And sometimes, Watterson used the strip just to play around.

I remember one Sunday comic that began with Calvin saying—

“Something is seriously wrong here. “

“The laws of perspective have been repealed.”

“Objects no longer diminish in size with distance. Lines do not converge toward any point on the horizon!”

As Calvin speaks, he dashes through the increasingly distorted and disorienting panels of the comic strip, where floors have become walls, staircases look like twisted alien life forms, and lamps sit impossibly askew on improbably constructed tables.

“All spatial relationships are lost!” cries Calvin, “It’s impossible to judge where anything is!”

OH NO!

About this time, Calvin's mother intrudes as the voice of reality, shouting, “Calvin! Quit running around crashing into things or I will sell you to the MONKEY HOUSE!”

And in the final panel, Calvin grumbles to himself, “Now SHE's lost perspective.”

It's frankly not all that funny, as punch lines go—that whole comic strip was likely just an excuse for Watterson to play with drawing distorted perspectives and bizarre points of view. He often looked for ways to bring a new level of artistry or visual interest to the Sunday comics. And as artistic accomplishments go, it's pretty interesting—sort of Escher meets Picasso meets Marcel DuChamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase*. But there's really no high humor or deeper message there.

Until.... until you begin to wonder, “What would it feel like, what would it be like to live in a world that has completely lost perspective? What would it feel like, what would it be like, if I began to lose perspective? What's real, what's not? What's important, what's not? Where is the level ground? What am I doing here?”

I can say this much: if Calvin's frenzied running around through chaotic and unpredictable surroundings was half as tiring as it appeared—then he must have been exhausted. And his running around chaotically crashing into things accomplished nothing constructive but was potentially destructive. No wonder his mother yelled in exasperation and threatened to ship him off to the monkey house. He was wearing her out, too.

And then I think—one of the most common and chronic complaints I hear these days is that people are exhausted, not in the purely physical sense of not having slept enough or of having worked hard or overdone it, but in an emotional sense, in a spiritual sense, in an ontological sense, which is to say that we are exhausted to the depths of our being.

I had a conversation just this week with someone who kept saying, “I'm just.... TIRED.”

And tired meant so many things, I think. It sounded like tired meant discouraged, world-weary, two quarts low on hope, a little bit cynical, and feeling as if...well, as if much of life was running around chaotically and accomplishing nothing very constructive.

That conversation reemphasized, for me, why the Sabbath, the practice of Sabbath-keeping, is of such surpassing importance for our spiritual, emotional well-being.

Now I should first say that in our current busy, modern-day culture, Sabbath is hardly even an afterthought. Sabbath seems like the irrelevant commandment—like violating it is a hardly even a theological misdemeanor. It seems a bit like jaywalking compared to thou shalt not kill or thou shalt not commit adultery.

But Sabbath keeping has some genuine importance to God—it made the top ten list of commandments, after all.

In fact, among all of the commandments, “remember the Sabbath and keep it holy” gets the most ink, as if its importance demands further explanation as compared to the other commandments.

In Exodus 20’s listing of the commandments, the Sabbath is justified because God created the world in six days and on the seventh day God rested and reflected upon God’s labors.

We, therefore, are commanded to set aside a day to rest and to reflect upon God’s labors. Not merely a day to relax, take in a ball game, go to a movie, read a book, or nap...though those activities can be restorative in their own right. But a day to recall our place in the created order, to remember that the world is a result of God’s industry and not ours. And why is that so important?

In the movie *Bruce Almighty*, Jim Carrey plays a man who voices constant complaint about God’s ordering of the world. So God, played by Morgan Freeman, offers Bruce a chance to sit in the big chair, so to speak: to play God’s role for a time, step into God’s shoes, and run the world, answer all the prayers, make the literal life or death big-picture decisions. There is a telling scene in the movie in which Bruce is inundated, overwhelmed and paralyzed by the sheer volume of prayers: for healing, for hope, for guidance, for wisdom, for comfort—only to discover that the impassioned outpouring that so overwhelms him is the prayer output of the greater Buffalo, NY area, and no more. It is a quick lesson in perspective—do you think you know everything, Bruce? You don’t know a half of a scintilla of everything. Be still, and know that I am God....and, parenthetically, you are not. When God takes back over from Bruce, it is as though an immense burden has been lifted.

I think the sense of being inundated and overwhelmed that Bruce experiences is like the sense of exhausted despair that we encounter when we begin to imagine that everything depends on us. Of course, some things depend upon us—we have jobs with expectations, we have family members with needs. But everything does not depend upon us. The Sabbath restores our perspective—we are not small g “gods,” seeking to run the world like petty tyrants; the world depends upon God’s industry, and not ours.

That is the truth that our scripture lesson from Matthew seeks to convey. It is an invitation to step back from our worry, our industry, to climb off our hamster wheel, and to remember that life is a gift, that God provides for our needs. When Jesus invites his listeners to consider the lilies of the field, we can imagine him gesturing to nearby flowers, and saying, “Look at these lilies. Really, look at them—consider them. They grow, they flourish, they live, they die. God sends sun and rain upon them. They endure dry seasons, bad weather—but they do not waste their energy on worthless worry. They occupy their place in the created order. Their focus is not on what they must do, they know simply how to be—and you, who do so much, who hurry so much, who worry so much—must learn how to be.”

Now if you want a short homework assignment, take a look and compare the ten commandments in Exodus chapter 20 and in Deuteronomy chapter 5. They are quite nearly the same, even using the exact wording in most instances. The chief difference is that the justification for Sabbath offered in Deuteronomy is different from Exodus. Instead of making the Sabbath a day to reflect upon whose industry defines the world (namely God’s), the Deuteronomic listing of the commandments makes the Sabbath a day for remembering identity. Remember your heritage and where you came from. Remember that you were a slave in Egypt, and the Lord your God 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. Remember who you are.

And that, I think is another important aspect of restoring our perspective: How easy it is, day to day, to forget who we are, or more precisely to forget WHOSE we are, and to live and behave as if we do not ALL belong to God. If we forget our identity—it distorts our whole reality.

I'll turn to another story as illustration. One of the books in C.S. Lewis's treasured *Chronicles of Narnia* is *The Silver Chair*. In the book, Prince Rilian, the crown prince and heir to the throne of Narnia, is taken captive by an enchantress. He is spirited away to an underground city, where he lives his life with an illusory and distorted worldview of who he is and of what is even real. He is led to believe that he is a prince of the underground kingdom, that he belongs there, that his life is ordered as it should be, and that he will one day lead an army to conquer Narnia. But each day, for only an hour, he remembers his true identity. He remembers what the sun is like, remembers where he came from, remembers that he is not a child of the underground world but is in fact the child of the true King.

To keep him imprisoned, his captors daily tie him in the silver chair that the book's title describes. He is bound until his "madness" passes and his "true identity" is regained.

In the context of Deuteronomy, the importance of Sabbath is like that recurring brief interval in which Rilian remembers who he is, what is real, what is true. If one removed that daily awareness, that sliver of insight, that recollection of his true identity, then Rilian would lose perspective completely and down would be up, left would be right, and life would not be meaningless, *per se*, but would have a counterfeit meaning.

Now holding that image in mind—how much of the time does life, or the world, or society, or the media spend offering to us or imposing upon us a sense of counterfeit meaning?

This is the way the world works, we hear: might makes right, wealth makes power, the meaning of life is to accumulate things and to pursue security, comfort, and immortality, or as close as we can come to it. In such a world, there are only winners and losers, the one who disagrees with me is my enemy, disaster threatens at every turn, and life in such a world requires a certain set of values and assumptions that we are invited, increasingly, to take on. Our culture invites us to take it on. Our leaders invite us to take it on. Advertisers invite us to take it on.

Sabbath is a recurring interval of sanity, a restored perspective: Remember, who you are. You were slaves in Egypt, hopeless and in despair, trapped in an existence defined by power and wealth and people who acted like gods but weren't--and the Lord your God brought you out of

Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. You need not fear the world; you are a child of God. You need not fear for your own security, you are a child of God. You are God's children, you are God's own, you are God's.

Now take the Exodus perspective and the Deuteronomy perspective and put them together: Exodus: "You are not gods." Deuteronomy: "You are God's." That is the vital, life giving, world-ordering perspective of Sabbath: "You are not gods, but you are God's."

Does the world too often feel like an out of perspective chaos, wildly tilting left and right, where down is up and we run about crashing into things and into each other? Hear, then, the assurance and invitation of the Sabbath as captured in Psalm 46, verse 10:

Be still, and know that I am God.

Be still, and know.

Be still.

Be.

Perspective. Restored. Amen.