

Sabbath Rest

The Rev. Dr. Peter G.
James

Isaiah 58:13-14

Sermon Series:
Best Spiritual
Practices

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Frank Allegretti was a meticulous pilot, with more than 20 years of flying experience. The plane he was piloting crashed last year in an Iowa cornfield after running out of gas. Allegretti's story is fairly common among pilots. The National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) says pilots run out of gas with surprising frequency. In the last five years, fuel exhaustion was the cause or a contributing factor in 238 small plane crashes in the U.S., killing 29 people. Some of you will recall that singer John Denver's plane crashed in 1997, after running out of gas. Officials at the NTSB say the frequency with which pilots run out of gas baffles them. The director of the NTSB's office of Aviation Safety says it best: "There's a group of pilots who will knowingly push it, thinking, I can make it the last couple of miles, and come up short."

Some of us push it. We're always taking it to the limit. We work too hard. We live with unhealthy levels of stress. We have made busy fashionable. Busyness has become America's new status symbol. If you doubt what I say, ask someone how he is doing and see if he says something besides "busy."

Researchers at the University of Arizona have concluded that the

human body is designed for rest every seven days. The human body operates on a 25-hour cycle. Organized society prevents us from getting up one hour later each day to follow our natural internal clock, so our bodies demand rest every seven days. Steady work without rest leads to insomnia, hormonal imbalances, fatigue, irritability and other serious physical and mental symptoms. We need rest every seven days to give our bodies and souls recovery time.

The focus of today's Best Spiritual Practice is Sabbath-keeping. It may seem like a stretch to preach about Sabbath on Confirmation Sunday. I don't think so! Adolescents in this high-achieving culture are increasingly sleep-deprived, over-stressed and over-scheduled. More and more teens are being treated for anxiety and depression. Honoring the Sabbath is relevant for people of every age.

The rhythm of six days of work and one day of rest is woven into the fabric of creation itself. God works; we work. God rests; we're meant to rest, also.

There is symmetry to the first six days of creation in Genesis. On the first day of creation God said, "Let there be light" and there was light (1:3). This first day concludes with the refrain, "And there was evening and there was morning, the first day" (1:5). Each day begins with God speaking an aspect of creation

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into existence and ends with the same refrain. But the 7th day is different from the other six. God doesn't work or even speak on the 7th day. God rests.

God doesn't rest because he's tired. God never grows weary or becomes tired. God enjoys what He has made on the 7th day. Rest serves as a counterbalancing activity to the work God performs on the first six days.

This 7th day features prominently in the list of Ten Commandments. The first time these commandments appear in Exodus we read, "Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the 7th day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work..." (20:8-9). The Hebrew word for Sabbath, Shabbat, literally means to stop and rest. Whatever you are doing, take a break. Whatever you are saying; shut up already. Fold your hands and take a deep breath. According to verse 11, we rest on the Sabbath because it's something that God does.

The Ten Commandments are also listed in the book of Deuteronomy, the last book in the Torah. Deuteronomy is a word meaning "second law" and recapitulates the laws given to Moses. The 4th commandment begins, "Observe the Sabbath day and keep it holy" (5.12). While in Exodus we're told to remember, here we're commanded to observe. That's why faithful Jews light two candles on the Shabbat—to remember and to observe. The

rationale given for observing the Sabbath is linked to Israel's slavery in Egypt. When they were slaves, it was all work, work, work. They never had a day off. They were treated as tools of production to make pyramids. Work was incessant and unrelenting.

Someone had to codify the meaning of work on the Sabbath. So, Jewish rabbis came up with 39 categories of work prohibited on the Sabbath. Faithful Jews were meticulous in their observance of the Sabbath. That's why Jesus was scolded for plucking grain from the fields on the Sabbath. Jesus challenged those who would make a fetish of the Sabbath by saying, "The Sabbath was made for man; not man for the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27).

The Sabbath is God's gracious invitation to people. The Sabbath serves us, we don't serve it. Honoring the Sabbath is not only a command but an invitation to enter into God's delight. Delight features prominently in our Isaiah reading (58:13-14). We live in a delight-deficient culture. We have lost delight in God's simple pleasures. Enjoy your food. Marvel at the beauty of God's creation. Treasure those you love. Why not look at the Sabbath as you would the gift of a heavy snowfall once a week? Imagine the stores to be closed and you don't have to go anywhere. Do something enjoyable. What a delight!

I embrace my limits on the Sabbath. God is the creator, I am his creature. God is infinite, I am finite. There are limits to my energy.

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Perhaps our aversion to practice Sabbath reveals our unwillingness to live within the limits of our humanity.

I need a break from endless striving. Sabbath gives me distance from preoccupying concerns. When I become embroiled in a controversy, I need separation. Sabbath helps me assess the true importance of something. Some of the things I fret over aren't all that important. Sabbath cuts worry down to size.

Some of you remember a time when America practiced a different rhythm of Sabbath-keeping. Stores used to be closed on Sunday and youth activities kept to a minimum. Sunday is now a major shopping day. Children's athletics on Sunday morning are now standard fare. We now have around-the-clock accessibility to work.

I went to a Caps game recently. It reminded me of worship. No, really. It had ritual—repetitive chants and songs the faithful knew well. It had inspiration—fans seemed to draw strength and meaning when the Caps played well. It had devotion—the fans dressed in team colors were passionate about their team. It's no coincidence the word “fan” is short for fanatical. Their devotion was more fanatical than any I have witnessed in church. Sociologists tell us that sports have become the new religion of secular America.

Sabbath-keeping is radical in our achievement-oriented, what-do-you-do-for-a-living culture. This is where I tip my hat to observant Jews. The Sabbath has

been the hallmark of Hebrews throughout their history. This one act, more than any other, has kept the Jewish people from assimilating into surrounding cultures. This is certainly not the case with Christians living in the 21st century.

Preparing for this sermon has whet my appetite for practicing the Sabbath. I work on Sunday so I take another day off during the week. I've tended, until recently, to look at Sabbath as many people would their Saturdays, as a time to run errands and get things done. I want to practice Sabbath more intentionally. I'm inviting you to join me. To decide that we want to keep the Sabbath is the most important starting point.

Ruth Haley Barton identifies, in her book *Sacred Rhythms*, three practices to include in your Sabbath-keeping:

1. Rest the body. Marva Dawn in her book *Keeping the Sabbath Wholly*, tells the story of a wagon train bound from St. Louis to Oregon. The people on the wagon train were devout Christians and refused to travel on the Sabbath. But winter was fast approaching and some began to panic, afraid they wouldn't reach Oregon before the onslaught of heavy snow. Some proposed suspending the practice of stopping for the Sabbath and continuing their travel seven days a week. This caused so much contention that the wagon train split into two groups—those who didn't want to travel on the Sabbath and those who did.

Guess which group arrived first in Oregon? The ones who refrained

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from traveling on the Sabbath! The people and horses that were physically rested were able to travel more effectively the other six days in the week.

2. Replenish your spirit. In an agrarian culture, rest meant taking a break from back-breaking physical labor. In a day when people spend so much time before a computer screen, Sabbath-keeping may involve more active pursuits. Exercise, take a walk or engage in a hobby. Turn off your electronic equipment to pay attention to those things that renew us and bring us delight.

Ruth Haley Barton suggests eliminating worry from the Sabbath. She suggests that we take a sabbatical from stress every seven days. Some of us are consumed with worry for children, parents or siblings. We are anxious about work or the stock market. Doesn't a Sabbath free from worry appeal to you?

3. Restore your soul. Worship centers us in God again. Those of you who come occasionally to worship, I invite you to consider coming weekly—not to hear me preach or Stan pray or the choir sing. Worship centers us again in what matters. It brings us back on point to God again. If you despise dressing up, dress casual. If getting ready for church is a hassle, negotiate about getting out the door on time. If you are dragging after a late Saturday night, consider going to bed at a reasonable hour. Maybe that's why the Jewish Sabbath begins at sundown.

The central issue of Sabbath-keeping is trust. Can I trust God to manage the world without me? The world continues working even when I stop. William Willimon says it well: "Sabbath-keeping is a publicly enacted sign of our trust that God keeps the world, therefore, we don't have to. God welcomes our labors, but our contributions to the world have their limits. If God trusted creation enough to be confident that the world would continue while God rested, so should we."

God has accomplished this work of redemption for us. We renounce trust in all our good works. In Sabbath, we learn, by faith, to rest in God's grace.

