



WESTMINSTER  
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

March 15, 2020

**Not the Sabbath  
We Were Looking For**  
Dr. Bruce Lancaster

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Printed in the United States of America

First Printing: March 16, 2020

## Not the Sabbath We Were Looking For

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### *Psalm 23* *Genesis 1:31-2:3*

This is a strange Sabbath, isn't it, not being here together; and yet we know that through the Spirit we are 'here' together. Our sermon series for Lent is on the Sabbath, following the Fourth Commandment in Exodus and Deuteronomy, "To remember the Sabbath and keep it holy." So how is it that we keep it holy when we don't get together?

As I said last week, when we looked at the meaning of Sabbath, the Hebrew word *shabbat*, means 'to cease, to stop'; that stopping work is not easy. It tests us: Will the world and we fall apart if we stop making things happen for a while?

Those are very real questions for us in these days as so much of the world is coming to a stop. The Coronavirus has forced us to cease. From sports to shopping, from worship to work, from vacations to visits: stop, stay home, cease.

We are in uncharted territory. What's going to happen? Some scoff at decisions made to cancel events, but others are very much thinking 'better safe than sorry.' We are with you today through this medium of communication because we have canceled our face-to-face events.

There are things we can do, or actually not do, when it comes to this 'ceasing' of what we see, of what we know of our normal way of life. But even more, I think it's important for us to understand it in terms of our faith response.

Where is God in all of this? What does God want us to do? I don't want to make light of what's happening, but I did smile when I read about a church that canceled their major faith-healing service because of the Coronavirus, a faith response!

What is God's word to you and me when it's not a question of 'Stop the world, I want to get off'; it's 'The world has stopped and I can't get off'?

The prophets and the psalms, Paul in his letters, Jesus himself says, "Do not be afraid." I know that, but I must confess I find that to be easier said than done. But maybe that's just it – there is a way to 'do it' to not be afraid, not be anxious, not caught up in the wearisome worries of what might happen.

And here it is, way before the prophets and psalms and Paul and Jesus; it's what we are told to do when the world stops, when we cease. Look back at the creation story in Genesis 2: *"And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation."*

In a study group on this passage, someone said: "If I could describe this scripture in one word it would be 'Necessary'...If it is essential for God to rest, it is certainly essential for humans."

And whether we like it or not, it is now more than ever 'necessary'. I remember someone saying how we are really

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proud of our Protestant work ethic, but we don't have much of a Protestant rest ethic.

Abraham Heschel, in his wonderful book *The Sabbath*, talks about Sabbath rest in terms of the Hebrew word *menuha*, which means 'rest'. He says the word means "much more than withdrawal from labor and exertion, more than freedom from toil, strain or activity of any kind."

He puts it in terms of a state of mind, a sense of being where there is no conflict or fighting, no fear or distrust. It is the essence of the word *shalom* which we usually translate as 'peace' but actually has a deeper meaning of 'completeness', if you will, to be in a time where we are living life W-H-O-L-L-Y...wholly. And when we do that, life is lived H-O-L-Y, holy. Wholly holy.

This might help, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want...He leads me beside still waters", literally the waters of *menuhot*. God leads us to Sabbath, to cease and rest in our lives for our souls to be restored... Sabbath rest is not a matter of doing nothing, but is necessary for how we complete our humanity.

Sabbath is one of God's great, wonderful gifts to us: leading us to those places and times of 'still waters', a connection with God and with others and with ourselves, an opportunity to know the presence and peace of God no matter our circumstances.

We are literally in the midst of an extended Sabbath, if you will, and I believe that this is a moment in time, this pandemic that will reveal who we are. This extended

“Sabbath rest” requires us to make decisions, as a nation, as a community, as a church, each of us.

And the Fourth Commandment about remembering the Sabbath and keeping it holy is clear that those are life-saving decisions that value people over money, prioritize humility over ego, and listen to the needs of the vulnerable over the demands of the powerful.

These three Sabbath values are fundamental to the church; and this public health crisis is simply a point in time in which we can ask ourselves:

What does it really mean to be the church, as the sign says out front: “A Community of Faith”?

Does community mean that we just get together to get together, or is there something more?

Whether it’s after six days of our own stressed life or in the midst of this health crisis, this “stretched out” Sabbath is an opportunity for us as a community of faith to be a group of people

- who are willing to disrupt their own routines and make sacrifices to prioritize the health of someone else,
- who share one another’s burdens physically, financially, spiritually, and emotionally,
- and who will care for one another and the least of these among us in a way that reveals who we are in love.

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Many of you have already seen and read this, but I close with this poem by Lynn Ungar entitled *Pandemic*:

What if you thought of it  
As the Jews consider the Sabbath –  
The most sacred of times?  
Cease from travel.  
Cease from buying and selling.  
Give up, just for now,  
On trying to make the world  
Different than it is.  
Sing. Pray. Touch only those  
To whom you commit your life.  
Center down.  
And when your body has become still,  
Reach out with your heart.  
Know that we are connected  
In ways that are terrifying and beautiful.  
(You could hardly deny it now.)  
Know that our lives  
Are in one another's hands.  
(Surely, that has come clear.)  
Do not reach out your hands.  
Reach out your heart.  
Reach out your words.  
Reach out all the tendrils of compassion that move, invisibly,  
where we cannot touch.  
Promise this world your love –  
For better or for worse,  
In sickness and in health,  
So long as we all shall live.

TO GOD BE THE GLORY.





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