



WESTMINSTER  
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**Keeping the Sabbath Wholly:  
In the Beginning**  
Dr. Bruce Lancaster

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## Keeping the Sabbath Wholly: In the Beginning

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*Exodus 20:8-11*  
*Deuteronomy 5:12-15*

This season of Lent our guide for the journey will be the Fourth Commandment: *Remember the sabbath day and keep it holy.* (Exodus 20:8; Deuteronomy 5:12)

Abraham Joshua Heschel, the great Jewish scholar, notes that the word *qadosh/holy* is first used in the book of Genesis at the end of the story of creation. This word that speaks of the majesty and mystery of the divine is not used about a place, like a sanctuary or a mountain or an altar. No, the first time that the word *holy* is used is when it is applied to time: *And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy.* (Genesis 2:3) The Christian Sabbath is for us both a special day of the week and a special quality of time accessible daily.

Presbyterian minister and author MaryAnn McKibben Dana wrote a book entitled *Sabbath in the Suburbs* that chronicled her life as she, her husband, and young family tried for a year to observe the Fourth Commandment. She said that their goal was to live in a “sabbathly” manner, keeping the biblical command in spirit if not in letter.

So it is that we will look at Sabbath during Lent in terms of “Keeping the Sabbath Wholly”: w-h-o-l-l-y. This is from a book by Marva Dawn, and yes, the play on words is intentional. We will use the ‘sabbathly’ verbs from her book of Cease, Rest, Embrace, and Feast as signposts along the way.

The root meaning of “sabbath” is to stop. On the seventh day all work is to cease. This is true for everyone: family members, slaves, resident aliens, even animals. Sabbath is community-wide and egalitarian. Everyone from the boardroom to the barnyard breathes a collective sigh of relief from labor. On the Sabbath all are equal.

But here Exodus and Deuteronomy part company. In Exodus, the reason given for keeping the Sabbath is because in six days God created the world and rested on the seventh. Into the very fabric of creation, the need to rest is built in. There’s a divine rhythm: work followed by rest.

A Buddhist monk visiting New York was told by his Western host that they could save ten minutes by making a complex transfer in the subway at Grand Central Station. When they emerged from the underground in Central Park, the monk sat down on a bench. His host wanted to know what he was doing. “I thought we should enjoy the ten minutes,” the monk replied. The practice of Sabbath keeping is about getting the rhythm right.

In the beginning, God blessed the Sabbath. A blessing is a gift. The Sabbath in the book of Exodus reveals that gift; yet over time with all the rules and regulations of what you could not do on the Sabbath, Sunday became the poster boy of H.L. Mencken’s quote about the Calvinist faith: “The haunting fear that someone, somewhere, may be happy.”

No, according to scripture, on the seventh day God took pleasure in all that God had made. So the practice of keeping the Sabbath is, according to Exodus, rooted in God’s creation itself, the rhythm of work followed by rest.

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And we are to do the same. God knows we regularly need a break, down time, time to recharge our humanity.

As we unwrap the gift of Sabbath, it reveals blessings of renewal and joy. It is a time to be shaped within. It is a gift intended to refresh and renew us, to nourish us inside and out. “On the Sabbath,” writes Abraham Heschel, “we especially care for the seed of eternity planted in the soul.” John Calvin simply tells us, “We cease our work so God can do God’s work in us.”

If the book of Exodus explains the Fourth Commandment with the first major story of the Old Testament, The Creation; the book of Deuteronomy points to the other great story of the Old Testament, The Exodus. In the Ten Commandments in Deuteronomy, it says that the reason for the Sabbath is because God liberated the Israelites from bondage:

*Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore, the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day.*

(Deuteronomy 5:15)

The Hebrews were slaves in Egypt some four hundred years. They groaned under the weight of oppression, ceaselessly doing back breaking work, the roots of that song from the old musical “Show Boat”: “*Tote that barge, lift that bale...*”

God sends Moses to free them. And when Pharaoh refuses “to let my people go,” God delivers them and they escape across the Red Sea.

The Fourth Commandment in Deuteronomy reminds us of this emancipation from slavery and brings a social justice

edge to the Sabbath. You see, slaves would never get a day off. But, by God's grace, they are no longer slaves and are free to set aside one day in seven. They are free from Pharaoh's quotas, free to refuse to give their lives to the endless demands of the empire's economy.

But today, it's the same song, different verse: "Tote that phone, lift that laptop..." The demands of Pharaoh reach even farther into our lives, not just sunup to sundown, but 24/7 for the taskmaster's call. To set aside work on the Sabbath is in many ways an act of resistance against having your life defined by how much you produce.

To honor the Fourth Commandment is also to honor the First and Second Commandments to have no other gods, worship no idols. It is to dethrone the god named Work and to turn away from the idol named Performance.

Blu Greensberg has penned this modern version of the Fourth Commandment:

*Six days shall you be a workaholic,  
On the seventh day, you shall join the serene company of  
human beings.*

*Six days shall you take orders from your boss;  
On the seventh day, you shall be the master/mistress of your  
own life.*

*Six days shall you toil in the market;  
On the seventh day, you shall detach from all money  
matters.*

*Six days shall you create, drive, invent, push;  
On the seventh day, you shall reflect.*

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*Six days shall you be the perfect success;  
On the seventh day, you remember that not everything is in  
your power.*

*Six days shall you be a miserable failure;  
On the seventh day, you shall be on the top of the world.*

*Six days shall you enjoy the blessings of work;  
On the seventh day, you shall understand that being is as  
important as doing.*

To set aside time to rest, renew, and enjoy God's creation and the relationships God has given you requires you to trust that God will provide. The world won't stop spinning if you unplug from it. Jesus told us not to worry about tomorrow. But we have a hard time letting go of control, letting go of power, letting go of some sense that we are running the show.

Practicing Sabbath claims our identity not as doers and performers, only as good as our last report, project, or sermon. Despite their demands, we don't belong to Production and Busyness. We are free of these slave drivers. But neither are we trees that own ourselves. We belong to God. Keeping the Sabbath reminds us whose we are.

A university professor friend of mine tells the story of out of all the commencement speeches she has hear, there is one commencement speech she remembers: It was on the subject of priorities, of doing what's important first. The speaker illustrated her point by taking a mason jar and began by pouring in a cup of sand. Then she added small rocks, then medium sized ones, but by the time she got to



the big rocks she had on the podium, there was no more room. The she emptied the jar and started over. This time she put the big rocks in first, then medium and small and lastly poured in most of the sand which filled in the cracks. Amazingly, it all fit. It all worked out.

Sabbath keeping is a big rock.

TO GOD BE THE GLORY.



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