

Wrestling with the Sabbath

Psalm 92:1-4
by Dan Schrock
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A Psalm. A Song for the Sabbath Day.

- ¹ It is good to give thanks to the Lord,
to sing praises to your name, O Most High;
² to declare your steadfast love in the morning,
and your faithfulness by night,
³ to the music of the lute and the harp,
to the melody of the lyre.
⁴ For you, O Lord, have made me glad by your work;
at the works of your hands I sing for joy.

For the first thirty-five years of my adult life, I did not take a twenty-four hour Sabbath every week. I almost never took any Sabbath of any kind, ever. I, a minister of the gospel for a quarter of a century, ignored the Sabbath.

I had lots of excuses. I was a graduate student who had so many books to read and so many papers to write that I needed all seven days of the week to finish my work. In one early job, my Christian employer explicitly denied my request for a regular, weekly Sabbath, which often meant we worked seven days a week. He was the boss, so I had to do what he said. Later Jenny and I owned a house built in 1914 which needed repairs and improvements whenever I wasn't working at the church. Or I was a bi-vocational and later a tri-vocational pastor who had way more work than I could ever hope to accomplish in six days. And anyway, the Sabbath was only about rest, so why did I need to rest during the day when I slept well at night?

While not fully conscious of it at the time, I was also quietly rebelling against the Sabbath teachings of my youth. According to the preachers in my childhood congregation, God had laid down a law that we should not work on the Sabbath—which of course meant Sunday. All physical work was prohibited, like raking leaves, mowing grass, and working at your regular job. Moreover, implied

our preachers, they and the rest of the congregation would be watching to make sure we followed the rules. This threat had particular power for me because one of those preachers lived across the street from us, just a few doors down. He could look out his window and see everything I did. Even if people in the congregation couldn't see what we were doing on the Sabbath, God could, and God would hold it against us.

Oddly, the rules for Sabbath had exceptions. My mother and all other church women still had to cook Sunday dinner, and these dinners were frequently more elaborate than any other meal of the week, especially when guests came to the house, as often happened. The white tablecloth and bone china appeared, candles lighted, and a few extra dishes prepared, often with a dessert we didn't have on any other day. Then she had to wash all those dishes by hand—dishwashers were beyond our economic means—and by 3:00 on Sunday afternoon my mother collapsed on the sofa in exhaustion.

The other widely-approved exception was milking the cows and feeding the calves. When I was in high school we lived on a dairy farm, and everyone in the church knew animals still needed to eat and cows still needed to let down their milk or else their udders would get infected. Rest for the weary was impossible for a dairy farmer because we still had to work in that barn six hours every Sunday. If Sabbath was the cessation of work, then even back in that bygone era women in the house and men in the barn never had it. The contradictions between the preached rule and the approved exceptions were obvious.

Consequently I snubbed the rules of my youth by working nearly non-stop as an adult. For over a decade I worked sixty or seventy hours a week at one or the other of my simultaneous jobs. Every feverish day was straight-jacketed by the long to-do list in my head.

Finally the day came when I could no longer keep doing this. Or maybe I no longer wanted to keep doing it. I was tired, not the simple, ordinary tiredness after a ten- or twelve-hour day, but a more complex weariness that never went away no matter how well I slept or how much time I piddled away surfing the Internet. I wondered how I could keep going as I had been. I just wanted to stop, to stop everything.

My fumbling journey to Sabbath began in a conversation with Jenny who pointed out that Sabbath is not fundamentally about rest. Referring to Norman Wirzba's book called *Living the Sabbath, Discovering the Rhythms of Rest and Delight*, Jenny informed me that the real point of Sabbath is to take delight in the creation God has made and in the gifts God has given us.¹ I was shocked. The fundamental purpose of Sabbath is to experience delight, rather than to rest? The Sabbath is more about joy than about following a rule on physical and mental labor? Illuminating though it was, reading Wirzba's book did not mean I automatically started practicing Sabbath. But it did make me muse about what Sabbaths of delight might look like. What practices, experiences, and activities gave me joy? What allows me to sing the words of Psalm 92?

I did not actually start living Sabbath until this congregation gave me a sabbatical last summer. When the time came for us to plan this sabbatical, I told the Spiritual Leadership Team that while I enjoyed my work, I was unutterably weary after eleven years of sixty- and seventy-hour workweeks. We eventually agreed that one of the things I would attempt to do during the three-month sabbatical would be to observe a full twenty-four-hour Sabbath each week. It didn't have to happen on Sunday, but it did need to last twenty-four hours every

¹ Norman Wirzba, *Living the Sabbath: Discovering the Rhythms of Rest and Delight* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2006).

week. The SLT expressed their hope that when I returned from the sabbatical I would find a way to keep observing regular Sabbaths.

During that sabbatical I successfully honored the Sabbath from dawn on Sunday to dawn on Monday. It was easy because I had no pastoral responsibilities and attended a neighboring church. But when the sabbatical ended and I went back to Berkeley's rush of activities, I believed once again that I had too much to do to justify observing a regular Sabbath. This supposition lasted for three weeks, when I noticed I was beginning to feel strung out and restless. I was living on the surface of things, moving as an automaton from one activity to another. I was working for God but losing my internal connection with God.

Suddenly I remembered that I hadn't had a Sabbath in a few weeks. I further realized that if I was to get back in the habit of doing so I would have to schedule it. Since then I've set aside the hours from sunset Friday to sunset Saturday as Sabbath. As well as suiting my schedule, this period of time also coincides with the world-wide Jewish practice of Sabbath. I draw comfort from knowing that I'm living in Sabbath at the same time as millions of Jews.

If I put my mind to it, it's relatively easy to set aside a regular pattern of a twenty-four hour Sabbath. What's harder is discerning which activities are appropriate for Sabbath. If Sabbath is about delighting in God and God's gifts (including creation), then it takes some discernment to sift through what I choose to do during Sabbath. Certainly walks outside in God's creation are highly appropriate for Sabbath. If you enjoy being with people, then social activities might be a good focus for the Sabbath. Reading books that you enjoy could also be a good Sabbath activity, as long as you're not reading them for your work. The question is this: what gives you joy in God and in the gifts of God? Let joy and delight help to guide your choice of Sabbath activities.

Another issue that vexes me is how to begin and end Sabbath. Observant Jews have a set of ready-made rituals for Shabbat honed by long use, such as preparing the house, setting the table, lighting candles with words of blessing, reciting Kiddush, washing their hands, and eating challah bread. Christians have no such well-established traditions for the Sabbath, as far as I know. I've considered writing my own ritual, but both laziness and lack of inspiration have conspired to prevent it. For a while I marked the beginning and end of Sabbath by eating a small amount of goat cheese coated with honey, letting their delectable pairing catapult me into thanking God for the gift of Sabbath. But because no one else in my household is passionate about goat cheese and honey, the ritual seems too individualistic. I need to experiment more with what ritual(s) will effectively set Sabbath off as holy time.

A related problem is that Jenny and I haven't yet synchronized our Sabbaths. She tries to keep Sabbath on Sunday, from dawn to bedtime. However, for as long as I keep working as a pastor, Sunday cannot be my Sabbath, which is why I've chosen sundown Friday to sundown Saturday. That generally doesn't work as Sabbath for Jenny, who on Saturday tries to finish various work projects. Neither she nor I is satisfied with this arrangement since it prevents us from being in Sabbath time together. We are locked out of simultaneously luxuriating in Sabbath activities, resulting once again in an individualistic observance of a practice which at its best is intended to be communal.

Though I haven't been practicing a weekly Sabbath very long, and still practice it imperfectly, I can already notice some of the ways it affects me. The most immediate effect is that I get crabby when I don't or can't step into a weekly Sabbath because of some emergency. A similar effect happens if I choose activities

that miss the mark of Sabbath: I feel out of sorts by the end of the twenty-four hours, unrested and unrefreshed. The following week consequently drags.

But if I do Sabbath wisely and well, I notice that I happily re-enter the world of work. Since beginning to practice a regular Sabbath, I've started to feel less exhausted and less stripped of inner resources. I'm more patient with the people I live and work with. I more easily brainstorm potential solutions to problems. I'm more productive. I feel more whole than perhaps ever before. Sabbath is becoming an opportunity to let my created senses—sight, sound, touch, smell, and taste—play without any purpose other than delighting in the presence of God refracted through creation, light exercise, simple food, family, art, and music.

What does your Sabbath look like? And how would you like to change it?