

A Sabbath of the Mind

Amos 8:4-8

Sermon by Dan Schrock

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⁴*Hear this, you that trample on the needy,
and bring to ruin the poor of the land,*
⁵*saying, "When will the new moon be over so that we may sell grain;
and the Sabbath, so that we may offer wheat for sale?
We will make the ephah small and the shekel great,
and practice deceit with false balances,*
⁶*buying the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals,
and selling the sweepings of the wheat."*
⁷*The Lord has sworn by the pride of Jacob:
Surely I will never forget any of their deeds.*
⁸*Shall not the land tremble on this account,
and everyone mourn who lives in it,
and all of it rise like the Nile,
and be tossed about and sink again, like the Nile of Egypt? (NRSV)*

I know a man who grew up many years ago in what was then called the Evangelical and Reformed Church. The Evangelical and Reformed Church, or "E & R" as people affectionately called it, eventually merged into what is now the United Church of Christ. Anyway, this man tells the story of an incident that happened more than 70 years ago when he was a boy. The E & R church he and his family attended was located in a small town in Missouri which had only two churches: the Evangelical and Reformed Church where his family went, and a Missouri Synod Lutheran Church.

The story is that the town's only grocer was a member of the Evangelical and Reformed Church, but despite being a member of the church, the grocer and his wife never stayed for the whole worship service. Indeed, the grocer and his wife did not even stay for the whole sermon. About five minutes before the sermon ended, the grocer checked his watch, and then stood up in the pew with his wife, ceremoniously walked down the long aisle in the center of the church, and left the building.

Why did the grocer leave in the middle of worship every Sunday? Because he wanted to open his grocery store for the Lutherans. It turns out the Lutheran church ended their worship service 30 minutes before the E & R church did, and the grocer did not want to miss any opportunity to make a sale. He wanted to leave his own church early and hustle back to the store to sell his Lutheran customers potatoes and onions and carrots and whatever else they wanted to buy. Obviously, the grocer was multi-tasking in church, pretending to worship God in body, mind, and spirit, while really looking at his watch to open his store on time. He may have been thinking about God, but he was also thinking about business.¹

Here in 2015, we might think that multi-tasking is a habit unique to our time and place. We suppose we are the only people in history who have been tempted to do two or three things at once. Yet this story from about 70 years ago shows that multi-tasking is an old and persistent problem. Indeed, multi-tasking is a problem that also appears in scripture.

As scripture tells it, multi-tasking on the Sabbath is a problem which started way back in ancient Israel. Consider King Solomon. The stories handed down to us hint that Solomon was a discontented, restless man driven to acquire more and more. Certainly he was relentlessly driven to acquire more women. According to 1 Kings 11:3, he eventually acquired for himself 700 wives and 300 concubines, which totals out to 999 more women than any man should have. We can guess these women were little more than commodities and possessions to him. How can anyone have a well-rounded, trusting, and intimate relationship with one thousand spouses?

There's more. In addition to the women, he also amassed "silver and gold, garments, weaponry, spices, horses, and mules" (1 Kings 10:25). For himself he built

¹ This story comes from Walter Brueggemann's *Sabbath as Resistance: Saying No to the Culture of Now* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2014, 58-59. Some of the inspiration and material for this sermon comes from chapter 5, pages 58-68.

a very nice palace, better than anything the previous kings of Israel had lived in. And we cannot forget the lavish temple he built in Jerusalem. Maybe he built this grand temple partly for the glory of God but you get the suspicion that he also built it for the glory of Solomon, He had to know that constructing such grand buildings would enhance his personal prestige in the world.

Imagine that you are Solomon. You're constantly on the hunt for more wives than the hundreds you already have. You collect precious metals, stylish clothes, advanced weapons, exotic spices, war horses, and pack mules. You plan expensive building projects. In addition to all this, you have to rule a nation and in one way or another be a father to hundreds of children. Now imagine going into that grand temple for worship every Sabbath, the very same temple that you built with your own money to enhance your own prestige as well as the prestige of God. While you're sitting there for Sabbath worship, what do you suppose your mind will be thinking about most of the time? Will you be thinking about God and covenantal fidelity? Probably not. Will you be thinking about the plight of the poor in the land? Not likely. Most of the time you will be sitting there in worship scheming where to find your next wife, plotting how to finance yet another building project, brainstorming how to get your hands on a new Eastern spice, wondering how to upgrade the chariots in your arsenal, and calculating how to breed more horses. Friends, restless acquisitiveness drove Solomon's life seven days a week. It led him to multi-task even in worship.

It wasn't supposed to be this way. Sabbath was designed in part as a vacation from multi-tasking. Sabbath was supposed to be the one day in a week when God's people shelved the concerns of commerce. Sabbath was intended to be a day of freedom when people were liberated from buying and selling—even liberated from all thought of buying and selling. Sabbath was created as a gift, an opportunity to shuck off the concerns we normally carry the other six days, and now, on this one

day, luxuriate in blessed freedom to connect with friends, to leisurely enjoy our meals, to make music and listen to music, to laugh and play and worship.

Several prophets in Israel's history criticized the flagrant disregard people had for Sabbath. Isaiah (1:12-17; 58:1-7) and Hosea (2:9-13) both did this; but the prophet we focus on today is Amos, who perhaps more than anyone else in the Old Testament shared his heart with the poor and leveled his criticisms against the rich. In the prophetic utterance we heard today, Amos lampoons the wealthy class for multi-tasking—for mixing Sabbath with commerce. To make matters worse, it wasn't even fair commerce: it was corrupt commerce that trampled on the needy and brought economic ruin on other people (v. 4). Business owners were using shady practices like making their packages small and their prices high (v. 5b). To put it in modern terms, they pretended to sell customers a full pound of flour, when in reality that "pound" only weighed 15 ounces. Then to make matters worse, they overcharged for that diminished pound.

Amos says in verse 5a that people couldn't wait for the Sabbath to be over so they could start selling again. Clearly these people were not honoring the intent of Sabbath. They were not enjoying its delights and freedoms. Instead they were pining for this day of rest to be over and done with so they could go back to taking advantage of other people. They were multi-tasking on the Sabbath. Like Solomon, people used the day of Sabbath to plot and scheme how to acquire more, how to best others in the game of buying and selling.

Amos wants his listeners to take a Sabbath of the mind, where we don't even think about the concerns of the other six days. We give our worries and cares a rest. We let our mind take a mini-vacation. One thing that might mean is that on Sabbath we single-task rather than multi-task. We think only about one thing at a time, but not about anything related to our work. Ask yourself this: How is your mind occupied on the day you take as Sabbath? Your body is probably at home,

but how is your mind occupied? Are you still thinking about your weekly work, such as next week's classes or last week's clients? Or instead, are you letting your mind roam into other subjects and other interests than you usually think about during the week?

This is one of my cutting edges in practicing Sabbath. It's very easy for me on Sabbath to let my mind think about this church, or about any of the other stuff I do the other days of the week. In my usual slow and stumbling way, with a lot of trial and error, I'm still experimenting with how to occupy my mind during the twenty-four hours of Sabbath. I'm learning that Sabbath works best when I can immerse myself in an activity that focuses my mind. I choose one thing and give myself over to it, like playing music, reading a book on a completely different topic, drawing and coloring, walking outside, and so forth. Any of these take my mind elsewhere. They help me not to multi-task on the Sabbath. They bring me delight and joy.

What activities give you a Sabbath of the mind? What provides you with a welcome break from the other six days of the week? What helps you to focus on the goodness of the present moment and the present place? What offers you joy?