



Roanoke, Virginia

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“Taking a Re-Personal Day”

Exodus 10:24-27, 31:16-17

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“I’ve been thinking,” the email began. When an email starts that way, I get nervous. Sometimes, what someone is thinking is nowhere near *my* thinking... and sometimes someone else’s *thinking* leads to my *working*.

But this time, the thinking lined up: Bob Martin’s email read my mind. Bob serves on the session, and at the session meeting this past Wednesday, we talked about how folks are beginning to feel safe enough to come back to church.

I am happy about that. Of course, I remain happy so many people continue to worship online. (Hi mom and dad—See you in a couple of weeks). But I love seeing new and familiar faces on Sunday mornings and having more voices join in on hymns.

However, I do think the past two years have given us an opportunity to reflect on the meaning and value of many things we do as a people of faith, such as observing the Sabbath. To that end, we’ve invited Rev. Howard Dudley to come as our Evening Bible School speaker. You’re going to love this guy: an outstanding preacher, teacher, and musician...; big personality and a lot of fun to be around.

I was going to wait for Howard to speak to keeping the Sabbath, but I read something when I was away on continuing ed that I want to share with you. This year, my seminary study group met to read and discuss a book by Walter Brueggemann called, *Delivered into Covenant*. Brueggemann’s insight lined up with what I was thinking and what Bob was thinking when he sent his email. But before I share what Brueggemann and Bob had to say, listen to what the book of Exodus has to say.



First, from Exodus 10:

24 Then Pharaoh summoned Moses, and said, “**Go, worship the LORD. Only your flocks and your herds shall remain behind. Even your children may go with you.**” **25** But Moses said, “**You must also let us have sacrifices and burnt offerings to sacrifice to the LORD our God.** **26** Our livestock also must go with us; not a hoof shall be left behind, for we must choose some of them for the worship of the **LORD our God**, and we will not know what to use to worship **the LORD until we arrive there.**” **27** But the **LORD hardened Pharaoh’s heart**, and he was unwilling to let them go.

Now from Exodus 31:

16 **Therefore the Israelites shall keep the sabbath, observing the sabbath throughout their generations, as a perpetual covenant.** **17** It is a sign forever between me and the people of Israel that in six days the **LORD made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day he rested, and was refreshed.**”

Those of you who work, on what conditions can a personal day be taken? Does it need to be justified? Does there need to be a good excuse: a funeral, a child’s graduation, a doctor’s appointment? Is taking a day for your own personal reasons an option?

Different places of employment have different policies and there may be good reason to ask for a good reason from an employee who is asking for a day. But someone recently suggested to me that if a reason is needed for a personal day maybe it would be better described as an “Excused Absence Day.”

Much of Exodus is about why the command to observe the Sabbath is so critical to the worship and life of the people of God. “**On the seventh day, rest,**” we are told. Just as God rested on the seventh day, so too are we to cease from our labors and worship God.

Which brings me to the insight from Brueggemann that struck me. He says that the Hebrew word, “*nephesh*,” is translated too weakly as “rest,” or “refresh.” A better translation, he says, is “**to be made a person again.**” It is to be “**re-personed.**”

I read this and thought, “Perfect.” Is there a better way to consider the Sabbath as it is meant to be? Six days we spend working, being judged and measured by what we do, but on that seventh day, we remember we are God’s children, loved for who we are.

Brueggemann made this observation as he was talking about a section from Exodus that includes the two passages I read. In the first, the Exodus 10 passage, Pharaoh and God (through the intermediary that is Moses) are in the middle of negotiations about Hebrew slaves taking a “personal day.” Moses has stopped calling for Pharaoh to “Let God’s people go,” and now is asking just for a day for the slaves to walk out from under the Pharaoh’s watch and supervision so they can worship God. Pharaoh at first refused, but God’s counteroffer of plagues has softened his position. He then said they could go only without their children. Now he says they can take their children but leave their cattle and flocks behind.

I am reminded of the early industrial age when workers were valued only for their production. Child labor, long workdays, unpaid sick days, little to no time off, no help for



retirement... There was many a situation where workers, to stay employed, had to both provide for *and* neglect their families at the same time. Negotiations on their behalf eventually led to many of the labor laws we have today.

On the surface, Moses is negotiating on behalf of workers, pushing for slaves to have the freedom of a day- *one* day not to work but to rest; one day not to obey Pharaoh but to worship God.

Pharaoh is no fool though. If he has to give the slaves a day, he wants to be sure they know it is a *day on loan*. What's the point of slaves if they have their own day, anyway? Pharaoh is being forced to consider alternatives, but he is fine with their being ceaseless production for his benefit. A slave system that depends on depleted selves who work productively but who do not have enough sense of self to resist is just fine with him.¹

And, let's be honest. What is really at stake is whether the slaves will ever be truly free. What is really being negotiated is a cover story: a reason for slaves to leave and a reason the Pharaoh can say they escaped. But Pharaoh wants his slaves back.

I think you know that the Pharaoh doesn't win. The day comes when the slaves cross the Nile and their Egyptian pursuers are drowned. Once free in the wilderness, Moses stops being the negotiator and becomes the command-giver. Remembering that God rested on the Sabbath, remembering they were once slaves who had no value except for what they produced, they are to take a day, once a week, to remember who they are and to whom they owe thanks for their freedom.

I won't go into the Exodus 31 passage too much except to point out that if you take some time with it, and with other Exodus passages about the Sabbath, you'll find that the Sabbath is about interruption, protest, and alternative.

Interruption:

Our lives are not to be about endless production. In order to be made whole- to be re-personed, as it were, we need to interrupt our schedules to devote time to *being* instead of *doing*. Endless production is a “violation and contradiction of the order of creation.”² God is renewed, the earth is renewed, we are renewed by the healing of rest.

Protest:

When our time is owned by others—when too many hours are given to work, or too much of our attention is absorbed by those who are trying to sell us something or enlist us for something. We start living into the image of what these other voices and forces want us to become. We become prone to believe lies, to accept the world as it is given to us by those who want to manipulate us for their own gain. Worship is an act of fidelity to God, and thus is a declaration

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Delivered into Covenant*, WJK, p. 71.

² Ibid.



that our true selves are not for sale. Service, but not servitude, is what we are to offer the world, and the one we are serving is the God of justice, of compassion and of love.

Finally, Sabbath as **Alternative**:

The liturgy and rest of Sabbath creates an alternative space. It evokes the home we have with God. It provides a liturgical world that runs counter to chaos of the Pharaoh, the chaos of the wilderness, the chaos of life itself. Even in the barren desert, where finding water and bread are daily concerns, a day is to be taken to remind the people that life is to rise above survival and is to be lived with the dignity of those who are loved and are called to love.

Jesus urges the keeping of the Sabbath for these very reasons. He does this even when standing in opposition to Sabbath worship, liturgy and rules that serve the needs of the institution rather than the needs of those who rest and worship. “**The Sabbath was created for us, not we for the Sabbath**,” he says. In saying it, he is insisting that the Sabbath is not to be reduced to religious performance to earn approval. It is to be “an event of human-making.”³ It is to be a recovery of self- of one’s own self, and the healing and making of the community, which Paul calls “the body of Christ.”

This is where Bob’s email comes in. He read a quote by Jodi Picoult in which a character in her novel, *Wish You Were Here*, reflected on many people’s sense of loss during the pandemic. Having gone to an island in the Galapagos, Diana O’Toole finds herself quarantined for months, having to pass time that is not hers and living in a place that is not her home. It occurs to her that perhaps most people feel as she does: *robbed...., robbed of something or someone*. In the most extreme case, it can be because of death. In less extreme cases, it could be robbed of a graduation, a job, a family gathering, a friendship that is a casualty of the stress of the times. O’Toole is freshly reminded of how nothing is guaranteed, that everything can be yanked away.⁴

Reflecting on that quote, Bob wrote:

When I read this quote, it struck me more so than usual that everyone has experienced loss over the last two years and now more than ever (pile on inflation, market drop, potential recession, war...) people are realizing or re-realizing that there is no guaranteed tomorrow.

Which is precisely a reason to come back to church. Corporate worship is rejuvenating, fulfilling, heart-filling. We begin to re-gain some of the loss and re-thread the wounds, assuage the fears. We can experience all over again (perhaps in a renewed way) the love that flows from God, through Christ, through us to each other and back again. The full resuscitation of faith begins again.

What Bob called “resuscitation of faith,” Brueggemann called” the remaking of the person.”

³ Ibid, p. 74

⁴ Jodi Picoult, *Wish You Were Here, A Novel*



I invite you all, once a week, to take a personal day and rest. I also invite you to take a “Re-Personed Day” for worship. Find yourself again as God’s child and as God’s children. Let your self be re-formed and the body of the church formed in a day when we can remember who we are in God’s eyes.

