

Sermon: An Invitation to Sabbath in Times of Turmoil [SLIDE 1]

[SLIDE 2] “In yourself you rouse us, giving us delight in glorifying you, because you have made us with yourself as our goal, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.”¹

It is with these famous and stirring words that St. Augustine of Hippo begins his *Confessions*, a long series of personal meditations on his whole human life as he saw it encompassed within God’s providential presence, directing him to rest in God. As you might have guessed, I picked this quote to start my sermon for today because for the next two Sundays we are exploring the many ways that God invites us to experience times of Sabbath or “rest” throughout all of our life, but especially in times of turmoil and restlessness. We live in a time right now where rest can feel hard to come by. The last two years have made us restless not just on a personal and social level, but on the level of creation as a whole! While it might sound strange to say it given that the pandemic dominates the news and our thoughts every day, the pandemic is nonetheless only the tip of the iceberg when you consider the other social, environmental, and personal struggles lying beneath the surface. With the Apostle Paul, we too feel “the whole creation...groaning (Romans 8:22-23),” waiting for redemption, the rest of God in place of our bondage.

I think many if not most of us would say we have all experienced restlessness in one way or another recently—whether that restlessness manifests itself as physical, emotional, psychological, or spiritual restlessness and fatigue. In times such as ours, it is good and right for us to call out to God [SLIDE 3]: “God, grant us your rest, we pray, for our hearts are restless until they rest in you!” [I will repeat that prayer one more time and then after I repeat it, let’s pray it all together] Today, as we utter this prayer, let us listen together for God’s freeing and

¹ This translation is Sarah Ruden’s from her 2017 translations of the *Confessions*.

comforting word for us in scripture, just as we have already been listening in song, spoken word, and prayer.

Our scripture readings for today transport us to two moments in the story of God and God's people where Sabbath, a time set apart for resting, has a central place in the story. [SLIDE 4] The first moment tells us of a time immemorial or even a time beyond time itself—the time of the beginning when God first created everything and then rested; the second moment transported us to a moment in time when the people of Israel had just been delivered from slavery in Egypt and were staring down a long journey through the wilderness and yet were nonetheless asked to observe a day of rest. Imagine with me this second moment with me first. [SLIDE 5.1] Imagine what it must have been like for the Israelites after they left behind slavery in Egypt. The emotional high of escape and deliverance from years of crushing slavery and labor, followed by an emotional low of facing down what seemed like a never-ending wilderness with no set path forward. In Egypt, things were at least predictable; food was guaranteed, there were more permanent forms of shelter, even if meagre. At least they could go to bed on a full stomach. Now, in the wilderness, predictability and routine were out the window, and in their place came anxiety, stress, and fear due to the daily need to ensure everyone had proper shelter with their tents, got a good night's sleep, and found food or water the next day. In some ways, the Israelites traded one form of restlessness and turmoil for another—the restlessness of slavery in Egypt was replaced by the restlessness of an unpredictable wilderness journey. No wonder the Israelites started to murmur about their situation.

But it is in this moment of murmuring that God addressed Moses with the words: [SLIDE 5.2] "I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day. In that way I will test them, whether they will follow my instruction

or not.” (Exodus 16:4) I don’t know what stands out for you in this verse, but for me it is the phrase “gather enough for that day.” The natural impulse in an unpredictable journey through the wilderness would be to gather as much food as possible whenever it is available. Once a storehouse of food is secured, then you can begin to plan more predictably for the future: “here’s how we will ration it, here’s how we will distribute it so that everyone gets enough and has the energy to keep going each day.” But gathering more than what was needed for the day went against what God intended for the Israelites in this instance—only gather just enough for that day. Thousands of years later, a Rabbi named Jesus would tell his disciples similarly to pray for and rely on God for their “daily bread” (Exodus 16:15; Matthew 6:11) and not to worry about tomorrow (Matthew 6:34). But it is what comes next in God’s address to Moses that I really want to highlight this morning because it is at this point that we begin to hear God’s invitation to rest, even, perhaps especially, in times of turmoil. God said to Moses: “On the sixth day, when they prepare what they bring in, it will be twice as much as they gather on other days.” (Exodus 16:5)

Later in the chapter we find out that the reason for this: [SLIDE 6]

...he [Moses] said to them, "This is what the LORD has commanded: 'Tomorrow is a day of solemn rest, a holy sabbath to the LORD; bake what you want to bake and boil what you want to boil, and all that is left over put aside to be kept until morning.'" So they put it aside until morning, as Moses commanded them; and it did not become foul, and there were no worms in it. Moses said, "Eat it today, for today is a sabbath to the LORD; today you will not find it in the field. Six days you shall gather it; but on the seventh day, which is a sabbath, there will be none." (Exodus 16:23-26)

Isn’t it interesting that the first time scripture depicts Israel being called to observe Sabbath is while on their journey in the wilderness *before* they had even received the Law?

Many biblical commentators have noted that one of the lessons we can learn from God’s command to Israel to observe Sabbath while in the desert, before the giving of the tablets of the law, is that Sabbath is a universal law. As our Genesis text helped us see, Sabbath is built into

God's intention for creation itself—it is, you could say, part of the order God has given to creation that a time of rest, a time to cease from the labours of the week, is to be honored, enjoyed, and celebrated regularly.² After all, even God rested after working. As we heard in Genesis 2:2 [SLIDE 7]: “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.”

Curious biblical commentators have inquired about the fact that in this verse it said that God “finished” working on the seventh day. “Wouldn't it rather be that God finished work on the sixth day and rested on the seventh?” In his book on *The Sabbath*, Jewish theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel notes that when they interpreted this verse, the “ancient rabbis concluded [that], there was an act of creation on the seventh day,” and that act of creation was the creation of “rest,” rest understood here as the “tranquility,” “peace,” and “harmony” God intends for creation.³ On the other days, you might say, God created the “stuff” of existence—sun, moon, stars, water, land, vegetation, birds, land creatures, and human beings. But on the seventh day, God created a holy time to praise God for the beauty, goodness, and worth of all of these things, not just as tools or resources for our survival and multiplication on the earth, but as intrinsically good and beautiful, a reflection of the goodness and beauty of the God who made them. God created Sabbath as a day to give up our ceaseless efforts at being masters of our existence; being in control of or over the things around us, be it the land, animals, environment, other people. Instead, we open ourselves up to the presence of these things as gifts of God originally given in the very gift of our existence.⁴ And that is why Sabbath is as much about celebrating as it is

² See, for example, Fretheim, *Exodus*, 185.

³ This is described in Abraham Joshua Heschel's *The Sabbath*, pp. 22-23.

⁴ Biblical scholars have often noted that there is a kind of parallel between Israel's rescue from Egypt and the accounts of creation in Genesis. Israel's rescue from Egypt is, after all, a kind of “creation” story. Israel's redemption from Egypt is God creating a people out of the chaos of slavery and Israel's later settlement in the land is a kind of Garden of Eden.

about ceasing from work and giving up the tasks of the week. We practice sabbath not because we need to “recharge for the week ahead,” as if the sabbath was all really about serving our labouring.⁵ The Sabbath, again quoting Heschel, is “for the sake of *life*,” not for the sake of labour. What we do on Sabbath sets everything around us in proper context as gift of God and that is why we are commanded to keep it holy, set apart, because it is the lens through which we are to view all things. Acknowledging the gifts of God on the Sabbath, we intentionally choose to take on an attitude of thanksgiving, recognizing in everything that God is good and the giver of life, in spite of the fact that we may often be surrounded by the very real and difficult terrain of the wilderness. [SLIDE 8]

I can only imagine that it would have been hard for Israel to take up this mindset and observe Sabbath while in the wilderness. When we are at our most vulnerable, we sometimes grasp for even greater control. For example, we know from Exodus 16 that, at least initially, many Israelites still tried to go out to look for food on the seventh day but that it wasn't there. The impulse behind some Israelite's desire to secure more food on the Sabbath, especially in the wilderness of all places, is not hard to relate to: “I know God wants us to observe this time of rest but hey, if there is extra food out there, wouldn't it just make practical sense to go out and get it so that we can be sure we have some for tomorrow?” But the impulse ultimately comes from a place of fear, and fear is a poor teacher over the long haul because fear orders our desires away from delight in glorifying God towards control and manipulation.

Israel had a long time to try to let go of fear and embrace delight amidst uncertainty. In fact, Israel had 40 years of wilderness wandering (16:35) to learn this by relying on manna or

⁵ Heschel says this wonderfully: “To the biblical mind...labor is the means toward an end, and the Sabbath as a day of rest, as a day of abstaining from toil, is not for the purpose of recovering one's lost strength and becoming fit for the forthcoming labor. The Sabbath is a day for the sake of life.” *The Sabbath*, p.14.

daily bread and then intentionally stopping one day out of every week. I wonder if it ever got easier for Israel to observe this day. Can you picture Israel in the wilderness on the Sabbath day, stopped—not working, not collecting food, not trying to find their way out of the wilderness. Just there—in the wilderness—ceasing from what seemed like the ceaseless journey to a better land; perhaps also ceasing from their worry about when they will finally get out. 40 years! I think the length of stay in the wilderness provides us with another important lesson! Sabbath keeping is a lifelong discipline that can be hard to incorporate into our hurried and busy lives.

As we later learn from the books of Moses, Sabbath keeping would eventually be enshrined in Israel's law (Exodus 35:1ff; Leviticus 23-25; Deuteronomy 5:12) and as Israel exited the wilderness and began settling down, Sabbath became incorporated into Israel's sacrificial worship and ritual cycle (Lev.24:8; Num. 28:9-10). [SLIDE 9] In worship, Israel was constantly reminded that they were to keep the Sabbath as a way to “remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; *therefore* the LORD your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day.” (Deuteronomy 5:15). How tempting it can be, during a time of settlement and stability, to forget the gift of God in creation and redemption. Sabbath observance was and remains a way for God's people to be habitually reminded of this gift and thus to live as a people that view everything, the land, animals, and others, as gifts of God to be treated with dignity and respect.

Israel did fall into the temptation to forget God, the creator and redeemer, especially in more stable times throughout the years. As the prophets later make clear, Sabbath keeping was often described as a matter of moral urgency (exs. Isa. 56, 58:13; Jeremiah 17:21-27) in Israel. Israel often abandoned sabbath and needed to be called back to it by the Lord's prophets. And

later Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth, called people back to the Spirit of Sabbath keeping (Matt. 12), even as he also declared himself to be God's rest in person (Matthew 11:28-30). No matter how far Israel strayed from observing the Sabbath throughout its history (ex. Nehemiah 13), the scriptures constantly proclaim the Word that Sabbath observance is crucially important to the people of God.

[SLIDE 10] How are we, the people of God who follow Jesus, taking up the invitation to observe the Sabbath and keep it holy? I suspect that across our community we all have quite the variety of Sabbath practices that reflects our own diversity and the different kinds of rest that each of us needs. Next week we will hear some personal faith stories reflecting on their own histories of Sabbath keeping and its significance in the lives of our siblings in Christ. For today, however, let us simply reflect on God's invitation to rest in the time that God has set apart for us. For some of us, this invitation comes to us in a time of wilderness and restlessness—in those moments God invites us to rest from our anxiety about the future and to trust that God will be with us always. For others, God's invitation to rest might come to us in a time of stability and confidence—in those moments God invites us to remember that we are not the guarantors of our own creation or our own salvation. Every breath is a gift of God. Let us all, therefore, come rest in the one who has created and redeemed us, and who holds us through freedom and slavery, through anxiety and confidence, through home and wilderness; through life and death.

I began my sermon with a quote by St. Augustine that came from the very start of his *Confessions*. In closing, it is fitting to read a quote from the end of his *Confessions*, which returns to the theme he began with, the restless heart finding rest in God, the goal of life: [SLIDE 11]

Give us peace, Lord God, for you have given us all else; give us the peace that is repose, the peace of the Sabbath, and the peace that knows no evening. This whole order of

exceedingly good things, intensely beautiful as it is, will pass away when it has served its purpose: these things too will have their morning and their evening. But the seventh day has no evening and sinks toward no sunset, for you sanctified it that it might abide for ever. After completing your exceedingly good works you rested on the seventh day...and you willed your book to tell us this as a promise that when our works are finished (works exceedingly good inasmuch as they are your gift to us) we too may rest in you, in the Sabbath of eternal life.

AMEN