

“*Aseret ha-Debrot*: The Ten Spiritual Principles for Transformation”  
Part Five: The Fourth Spiritual Principle ~ “Remember the sabbath day”

Divine Leisure: The Holiness of Taking a Nap

By Rev. Ruth Ragovin

First Christian Church, Murray, KY

August 23, 2020



Exodus 20:8-11 (New Revised Standard Version) ~ <sup>8</sup> Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. <sup>9</sup> Six days you shall labor and do all your work. <sup>10</sup> But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. <sup>11</sup> For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.

Deuteronomy 5:12-15 (New Revised Standard Version) ~ <sup>12</sup> Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy, as the LORD your God commanded you. <sup>13</sup> Six days you shall labor and do all your work. <sup>14</sup> But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work—you, or your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock, or the resident alien in your towns, so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you. <sup>15</sup> 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.

It's February of 2019. Pre-pandemic. The alarm clock goes off in a home in Kentucky: an unwelcome harsh piercing sound breaking up the gentle breathing and deep calm of five hours of sleep. It is 6 AM. Bob jolts out of bed, tripping over the dog, and running into his wife Susan, who already has been up for an hour, getting breakfast ready, putting in a load of laundry, responding to work emails, writing out a check to pay the cable bill to drop off on the way to work. It is already a week late. Hopefully they won't turn it off. It is now 6:30 AM. Time to wake up their sleep-deprived kids. A frantic rush begins with the words, "Get up! Hurry up! Matt, you didn't finish your homework last night because you were at your basketball game and you know Coach Craig said you can't stay on the team if you can't get your grades up." At the last Parent Teacher conference they had been told that Matt's grades had dropped because his assignments were always being turned in late. He was having trouble juggling his daily school basketball practices, basketball games, work at Sonic, all the school clubs he was in, along with the academic pressures of his junior year in high school. This was a time when he needed to keep up his GPA and do well on his ACT, since they were going to begin the college search during Spring Break. Matt rolled out of bed, rushed into the kitchen, grabbed the milk jug and drank directly out of it, while trying to figure out his calculus problems.

Matt's 14-year-old sister Julia also emerged from the hallway, frustrated because she couldn't find anything to wear. The laundry had not been done in a week and in the mess of the piles of clothing and junk in her room she couldn't find either her cheerleading outfit or the music book to go along with her violin. She had back-to-back practices that day that would require some careful coordination on her parents' part to make sure she got to both. Today was going to be especially tricky since her mother had a doctor's appointment right after work where they were going to discuss what to do about her high blood pressure and cholesterol problems and her dad was getting ready to go away on a week-long business trip. Matt's car also had just broken down, so they had to figure out how to get him from his basketball practice to work at Sonic. They took out their calendars and looked at what everybody had scheduled at what time. At 7:30 AM the family rushed out of the house without having time to even say good-bye to each other, just barely making it to work and to school by 7:55. At work the mother Susan realized that she had completely forgotten to take out the dog. There are never enough hours in the day, she thinks, and breaks down in tears.

A little later her assistant walks over to her and hands her a letter in a beautifully embossed envelope. She opens it up. Inside she finds a gift certificate that says "Good for twenty-four hours of pampering your soul," along with a letter that says:

“Dear Susan,

This gift certificate is to be used for a whole 24-hour day that is to be devoted entirely to the needs of your soul. On this day you are not to work. You are to leave behind the cares of your office and housework. You are only to do things that are life-giving and restorative. You can spend time with your family and friends, read a book, listen to music, go for a long walk, take out your kayak, drive out to Land Between the Lakes, play with the dog, pray, or anything that brings you joy. However, I would like to encourage you to take a long nap and let your mind rest.”

Susan read on. Was this a hoax? It sounded too good to be true! In the midst of reading it she got a text message from her husband Bob. He was telling her he had received a gift certificate in the mail and he couldn't believe whom it was from. Susan looked down to the bottom of the letter. It closed by saying, “this gift certificate is good for a twenty-four hour period of time every week **for the rest of your life**. Love, God.”

Today each of us has been sent a gift certificate from God to spend a day each week for the rest of our lives pampering our souls and remembering who and whose we are. We find this gift certificate in the Bible in the form of the fourth commandment or foundational spiritual principle where it says in Exodus 20:8: ***“Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy.”*** While there have been volumes written both by Jewish and Christian scholars about the meaning of the Sabbath and the Lord's Day, there is agreement that God commands us in a positive way to take one day a week to let go of the everyday pressures and re-connect with a joyful, sacred way of being alive. The Sabbath is not about taking time off. Rather it is about entering into sacred time. If possible, it should be one day out of the week (for Christians ideally Sunday, since this commemorates Jesus' resurrection), but in this contemporary world where we may be required to work any day of the week or any time of the day or night, Sabbath time may also be a Sabbath afternoon, a Sabbath hour, or even a Sabbath pause. For example, I take a Sabbath pause whenever I hear the chimes of our church tower ringing. This is a signal to me to stop whatever I am doing, relax, and sink into God's loving presence. A Sabbath pause that brings refreshment to my soul.

The Fourth Commandment commands us to take time to break free from the pressures of life, from the hectic pace in which we are like hamsters running around a hamster wheel, to move from our linear, measured driven chronos time into God's eternal spacious Kairos time, to sink down and hunker into our deepest selves where we experience

something I like to think of as “divine leisure”. It is a slower pace where we are acting from our own God-given center, responding not to the world’s pace, but moving to a kind of divine metronome sounding deep within us. During Sabbath we are called to move into the spacious freedom of divine leisure where there is no hurry, no sense of urgency, no agenda.

**“Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy.”** This is one of only two of the ten commandments that is given in the positive as doing something, rather than refraining from something. We are commanded by God to keep the Sabbath because of the divine rhythm God built into the very fabric of creation of which we too are a part. All life (plants, animals, humans) requires a rhythm of inhaling and exhaling, activity and rest. We are pretty good at the activity part, aren’t we? But it seems that we have forgotten the part that we need rest. And so God, knowing that we are driven, not only commands us to rest but actually even models it as if to drive the point home, almost like a parent lying down beside her cranky toddler to try and help her take a much needed nap. We read in Genesis 1:31-2:2 that:

**“[God created the heavens and the earth] and God saw that all that he had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning—the sixth day. Thus the heavens and the earth were completed in all their vast array. By the seventh day God finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done.”** (Genesis 1:31-2:2)

On the seventh day, God rested, and blessed this one day of the week, setting it apart from all others. If God could rest in creating the universe, God’s people can rest! Thus we are given this fourth commandment or spiritual principle in the book of Exodus 20:8-11: <sup>8</sup> **Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy.** <sup>9</sup> **Six days you shall labor and do all your work.** <sup>10</sup> **But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns.** <sup>11</sup> **For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.**

The story of God giving the Ten Commandments to Moses in the book of Exodus picks up where Genesis left off. In Genesis we find God engaged in creating the universe and all that is in it. Just as God labored by creating the universe for six days and then rested

on the seventh, we too are to model ourselves after the God who created us in God's very own image and, after working or creating for six days, we are to rest. Six days are for creating. The seventh day is for re-creating. We need to hunker back down into our souls, to remember who we are and whose we are. We need to press the reset button, to step back to regain perspective and see the bigger picture.

Wayne Mueller in his book on Sabbath (that we read during our ecumenical 'Head and Heart' discussion group) says that: "*The story is told of a South American tribe that went on a long march, day after day, when all of a sudden they would stop walking, sit down to rest for a while, and then make camp for a couple of days before going any farther. They explained that they needed the time of rest so that their souls could catch up with them.* (Wayne Muller, *Sabbath: Finding Rest, Renewal, and Delight in Our Busy Lives* [New York: Bantam, 1999], p. 70)

***Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy!*** All week we can be in overdrive with an assault of information and responsibilities that can overwhelm our minds, bodies, and souls. Mueller reminds us that our hearts and souls need to be able to catch up and process the experiences of the week. Yet, we are reluctant to take time away from our many responsibilities. Our standard greeting to everyone is: I am so busy. The busier we are, the more important we seem to ourselves and, we imagine, to others. We wear our busyness like a badge of honor. Granted, we Americans are actually forced to be busy people. We work an average of 350 more hours or nine work weeks more than the average European every year. We are right up there with the exhausted Japanese. Because of our desire to succeed, sometimes even to make ends meet, to meet these ever-growing expectations, we ignore the God-given rhythm God built into creation and we do not rest. Because we do not rest, we lose our way. We miss the compass points that would show us where to go. We fail to immerse ourselves in that divine leisure or Sabbath rest from which right decisions and wisdom spring.

Wayne Muller also writes about "*Charles ... a gifted, thoughtful physician.*" He says that: "*One day we were discussing the effects of exhaustion on the quality of our work. Physicians are trained to work when they are exhausted, required from the moment they begin medical school to perform when they are sleep-deprived, hurried, and overloaded. "I discovered in medical school," Charles told me "that if I saw a patient when I was tired or overworked, I would order a lot of tests. I was so exhausted, I couldn't tell exactly what was going on.*

*I could see the symptoms, I could recognize the possible diagnoses, but I couldn't really hear how it all fit together. So I got in the habit of ordering a battery of tests, hoping they would tell me what I was missing.*

*But when I was rested—if I had an opportunity to get some sleep, or go for a quieter walk—when I saw the next patient, I could rely on my intuition and experience to give me a pretty accurate reading of what was happening. If there was any uncertainty about my diagnosis, I would order a single, specific test to confirm or deny it. But when I could take the time to listen and be present with them and their illness, I was almost always right.” (Muller, Sabbath, pp. 5-6)*

The fruit of Sabbath rest is wisdom, the ability to navigate life properly and ethically, and make right decisions. God knows this and that is why God gave us this commandment. There are even numerous occasions throughout scripture where God actually commands people to take naps. Do you remember the story of Elijah (I Kings 19:1-12) where, after encountering the priests of Baal on the top of Mount Carmel, he is on the run? He goes out into the desert, ready to throw in the towel and give up, and says “God I just want to die!” And God said, “Hey Elijah, how about instead if I give you some food and then you just take a nap.” So Elijah slept and ate and then decided things weren't so bad after all. That Sabbath nap brought clarity and new vision. He now knew how to move forward in life.

When Moses became overwhelmed by listening to the constant complaining of the people he was leading, God did not tell him to try this or that, to take a caffeine pill and soldier on, but instead he says, “Moses, my presence will go with you and I will give you rest.” In other words, Moses, stop everything you are doing and take a nap. And when Moses took some Sabbath time for himself, he was able to see more clearly again, to re-create himself, to put things into proper perspective, and make the right decisions about how to lead his people.

We know that Moses faced many challenges to his leadership. Do you remember when he returned from the mountaintop to discover the thousands of Israelites he was trying to lead dancing around a statue of a Golden Calf they had created to worship with his brother Aaron's help? I would like you to picture this scene in your mind when I read for you a second version of this fourth commandment to remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy, which is given to us in Deuteronomy 5:12-15.

*<sup>12</sup> Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy, as the LORD your God commanded you. <sup>13</sup> Six days you shall labor and do all your work. <sup>14</sup> But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work—you, or your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock, or the resident alien in your towns, so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you. <sup>15</sup> 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.*

While the version in Exodus of the fourth commandment takes us back to the Garden of Eden in the book of Genesis and asks us to model ourselves after God's behavior, the version in Deuteronomy takes us back to Egypt where the Hebrew people were slaves and did not have the freedom to rest. Remember, God says to these Israelites who are dancing around an idol of a Golden Calf, that you were once slaves in Egypt. Remember how I brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm! Do you remember how you had to work non stop, whipped into submission by harsh taskmasters? Do you remember how you were not given a day off, that you were not allowed to rest because Pharaoh needed you to complete his extravagant construction projects? Do you remember how exhausted you were and yet you were not allowed to sleep? The Pharaohs could rest and have times of leisure because the Hebrew slaves were not allowed to rest. Indeed, it was after Moses saw and killed an Egyptian who was beating a Hebrew slave that he left his life in the royal court and fled out into the wilderness to escape from being killed himself. It was there, forty years later, that God appeared to him in a burning bush and asked him to lead the Hebrew people out of slavery.

When God tells the Hebrew people in this commandment to remember that God helped them to escape from slavery in Egypt and now commands them to keep the Sabbath day holy, God is telling them and us to remember who we are: we are God's children. We are created in the very image of God. We are beholden to no one. To no taskmasters. We are being offered the precious gift and hard fought for freedom of Sabbath rest. Let's reclaim that freedom that was once denied us when we were slaves in Egypt! Let's reclaim that freedom to say NO to all the voices of the world that tell us to consume, to work, to be engaged in constant activity. Let's especially reclaim the freedom given to us by God to say NO to the worst taskmaster of all: namely our own selves, when we deny ourselves the right to Sabbath rest, thinking that somehow the world can't get by without us. That things will fall apart.

The great Protestant Reformer Martin Luther took seriously God's commandment to keep the Sabbath holy. One Sabbath day his friend Philipp Melanchthon said to him, "Martin, this day we will discuss the governance of universe." To which Luther replied, "No. This day you and I will go fishing and leave governance of the universe to God!" (A version of this is cited in Mark Buchanan, *The Rest of God*, 220). The world can get along without us, as another great theologian, Winnie the Pooh reminded us when he said: "*Don't underestimate the value of Doing Nothing, of just going along, listening to all the things you can't hear, and not bothering.*" Sabbath is a reminder to us to STOP! It gives us permission to hit the pause button. To listen to the voice of God in our souls. Yes the work will be there when we re-emerge from our Sabbath rest, but if we bring the strength and joy and rejuvenation of the Sabbath back with us out into the week we will be so much more effective, grounded, and happy on those other days! We will be so much more our better selves!

Let's remember that Jesus rested too. When we think of Jesus we imagine him frantically rushing around with the crowds following him while he taught and healed. Yet Jesus would stop in the midst of what he was doing, send people away, and disappear without warning or without providing an excuse or explanation. He would simply go off and pray and rest. Jesus took naps when he needed them and did not try to justify his doing so. Jesus did not do away with the Fourth Commandment, but he took it even further by saying "You are not made for the Sabbath, the Sabbath is made for you." (Mark 2:27) Sabbath is God's gift to us, Jesus says!

Let's remember that Jesus did not come into the world to offer "Ten Simple Management Steps to a More Productive Life." Instead, he offered the simple spiritual practice of rest. Jesus said, "*Come to me all who labor and are heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.*" (Matt 11:28-29)

**Closing Prayer:** Lord, let us be still and know that you are God. Let us free ourselves from the tyranny of slavery to the taskmasters of our clocks, our chores, our to-do lists, and the voice of our driven self that makes us feel guilty if we take time simply to be. Let us take Sabbath time to remember you, to worship you, to remember our true identity as the children of God, and to restore our souls. In Jesus' Name. Amen.