

One of my pet peeves in life is the one-upmanship party game “How busy I am.” Just in case you have not encountered it, and I can’t imagine you have not, it goes something like this: Player one goes into the feverish task of listing all the heavy assignments she has to complete. Player two then seeks to impress player one and everyone else within earshot of how much more she has to do. And so the game proceeds around the circle.

It reminds me of a game I encountered as a parent when parents got together to complain about their children. The complaints were not usually serious; no one really wanted counsel. It was just a measure of supposedly letting off steam by frustrating over the small but plenteous moments of aggravation that accompany the process of maturation and the adjustment involved in living with the idiosyncrasies of another person of whatever age.

With both games, I have often wondered what would happen if someone in the group didn’t cooperate—if someone in the midst of the competition said, “I don’t have that problem. I manage my time pretty well.” Or, “I try not to take on more than I can handle.” Or, “my children don’t aren’t like that.” It would throw a monkey wrench into things and probably bring the game to a screeching halt. The other players would probably either quickly melt away, muttering over the person’s self-righteousness or outright deceit; or the game might shift into a new competition over how well I actually manage my time and/or my household.

Dorothy Bass, director of a project on spiritual formation at Valparaiso University, tells of a Saturday evening dinner when a group of teachers sat at table whining about the pile of papers they each had to grade in the coming day. In fact, she observed, the teachers actually started to boast in an odd sort of way about who had the most papers, who worked hardest, who was most put upon by the demands of his or her job. Then, it hit her. Although every one of those present might occasionally break another commandment, she could not imagine them sitting around bragging about it, as in “I’m planning to take the Lord’s name in vain” or “I’m planning to steal or commit adultery.” “Our approach to the Sabbath commandment was different,” she observed. Everyone there had become so captivated by their work, “so impressed by its demands upon us and by our own indispensability,” that they had not thought about the sabbath commandment since confirmation class when they had reduced its meaning to going to church. And indeed, they all went to church, but they were all a long way from keeping sabbath.

How do we recapture the meaning of sabbath? How do we get beyond the legalism that has so plagued sabbath keeping in the past to the essence of a practice that has kept the hearts and grounded the lives of people of faith through the centuries?

In his book on the Sabbath, Rabbi Abraham Heschel recalls the story of a rabbi imprisoned in a cave where not even the faintest ray of light could reach him. Unable to distinguish the passing of night and day, the rabbi was tormented by the thought that he would not be able to observe the Sabbath with song and prayer as he had done from his youth. Added to this was the torment that he would not be able to smoke, an addiction that had held him in its grip most of his life. All of a sudden, the desire to smoke went away; and he said within himself, “Now it is Friday evening. It is Sabbath,” for the desire for that which was forbidden had for years regularly left him for the Sabbath’s duration, only to return when the day was finished. Joyfully the rabbi rose, thanking God and pronouncing blessing upon the day. So it went for all of the weeks of his confinement. The Sabbath faithfully came and went, guarding his days in the midst of perpetual night.

How do we recapture the meaning of sabbath as a day, yes; but more importantly, sabbath as a life-giving force that interprets and gives order and meaning to our very lives?

Sabbath comes to us in the midst of time. Sabbath was a unique observance among the Hebrew people. No other ancient people observed such a weekly festival. Unlike even Israel’s other festivals, the Sabbath was unattached to significant natural events, such as the new moon and times of planting and harvesting. Revered as a special gift from the hand of God, Sabbath is enshrined at the heart of the Decalogue or Ten Commandments, its significance indicated by its lengthy development. The sabbath commandment accounts for fully a third of the words in the Decalogue and serves as something of a transitional commandment, occurring at the point where the first commandments, focusing on relationship to God, give way to the last six commandments, focusing on relationship to others. Exodus grounds observance of the Sabbath in creation—“For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day.” The foundational significance of the Sabbath for Israel manifests itself, then, in the conviction that Sabbath was not something simply dreamed up at Sinai. Sabbath was built into the very structure of creation and incorporated all of life, including animal life and eventually even the land.

Sabbath is about time and the meaning of time. As Rabbi Heschel points out, it is the only instance in the creation story designated as “holy.” Later at Sinai, the people Israel is called to be holy, and only after the people had succumbed to the temptation of bowing to a *thing*, the golden calf, the construction of the Tabernacle is commanded, a holiness in space. “Time,” Heschel observes, “was hallowed by God; space, the Tabernacle, was consecrated by Moses” [*The Sabbath*, p. 10].

Sabbath speaks of freedom in the midst of time. Deuteronomy adds a second reason for keeping the Sabbath, grounding it in the deliverance of the Hebrew people from Egypt—“Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out . . . therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day.” Both Creation and the Exodus ground the Sabbath in freedom. The story of the Exodus obviously speaks to freedom, since it is the story of liberation from slavery. Yet the story of the Creation is the story of a God who took the risk of creating the world and setting it free. Again and again, the creation account depicts God

looking over what God has made and pronouncing it “good.” Then, on the seventh day, God stops working and rests. Walter Brueggemann observes, “The day of cessation from work declares that God’s creation is, at root, an unanxious environment for life that is not defined by energetic productivity or self-preoccupied consumption” [Introduction to the Old Testament, 35]. God, in other words, trusts God’s creation enough to step back, take a breath and rest. The question is, can we?

The word translated in the creation story as “rest” is the Hebrew word *menuha*. Much more than mere withdrawal from labor or freedom from toil, it is tranquility, serenity, peace and harmony. It signifies restorative quiet, where there is no strife, fighting, fear or distrust. Its essence is captured in the twenty-third Psalm: “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want, He makes me to lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside the still waters” (the waters of *menuhot*) [Heschel, 23]. *Menuha*, the ancient rabbis taught, was a positive creation of God on the seventh day of the week. The seventh day ushered rest, tranquility and trust into the midst of time and freed humanity forever from the grueling servitude to anxious, unending production and toil.

An artist, Rabbi Arthur Waskow suggests, will tell you that there comes a time in painting a picture when one more paint-stroke will ruin it. Good artists know when to stop, catch their breath and be at peace with their work. Then, on another canvas, the artist can begin anew. “Always, in a rhythm, there must be a pause to not-do” [Religion & Intellectual Life, Fall 1986, p 35].

Sabbath in the great Judaic tradition and in the experience of people of faith through the ages is about that rhythm. It is about trusting that rhythm. It is, in the words of Rabbi Heschel, about encountering “*holiness in time*.” It is about living from the memory of sacred events, learning to “consecrate sanctuaries” in the midst of time. “The Sabbaths,” Heschel explained, “are our great cathedrals; and our Holy of Holies is a shrine that neither the Romans nor the Germans were able to burn . . . the Day of Atonement” [The Sabbath, p. 8].

The Sabbath, someone has said, kept Judaism more than Judaism kept the Sabbath. Withstanding the swords of the Romans and the massive transports of the Germans, Sabbath, an interior observance of the heart, lived even when it was cut off from Temple and synagogue, providing respite, hope and stability for Jewish believers through the ravages of time.

What about us? How about you? How stands your sanctuary in the midst of time?

During the Bosnian conflict of the 1990’s, one of the few bakeries in Sarajevo with a remaining supply of flour was distributing bread to its war-shattered neighbors. A long line of starving people quickly formed, snaking far into the street. Suddenly at 4 in the afternoon, a shell exploded in the middle of the line, killing 22 people instantly and maiming others. A 37-year-old musician named Vedran Smailovic, principal cellist for the Sarajevo Opera, lived nearby. Observing the terrible scene, he knew he must do something. He chose to extend to his wounded community, the finest gift that he had. At precisely 4 o’clock in the afternoon from the day of the explosion to the war’s end, Vedran Smailovic dressed in his formal concert attire, took his cello and a small camp stool, and sitting down in the middle of the crater left by the shell, played a concert for the terrified people hiding in their cellars as bombs exploded all around them [Recounted by Robert R. Ellis, “Creation, Vocation, Crisis and Rest,” *Review & Expositor*, Spring 2006, pp. 316-317].

And so it is with us. In the midst of life’s pressures and tragedies, there stands a moment of quiet renewal that calls us again to hope, purpose and beauty. In the midst of time, there stands a sabbath sanctuary, breathing peace and making us whole.

So, how about it? How stands your sanctuary in the midst of time?