

God's Purpose for Humanity ... - Work & Rest

Genesis 2:1-3 and 15-17
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There's a story that Hebrew families tell their children to help them understand the fourth commandment, which tells us to rest one day out of seven, and make it a holy rest. It's the story of King Ruben. King Ruben was always asking questions. "Where's the hottest place on earth?" "Where is the deepest snow fall?" One day he asked his advisors, "What is the sweetest melody of all?" His wise men rubbed their chins and searched their books of wisdom, but they could not find the answer. So they had a contest to find the sweetest sound. The king called all musicians to the palace – flutes, harps, violins, horns, bells, drums, chimes, cymbals, gongs, triangles, lutes and lyres. Throughout the day, the king sat on his balcony and listened. As the last of the plucking, tinkling, blowing and banging faded, the advisors asked him, "Which melody is the sweetest to your ears, O King?" King Ruben had listened but could not tell which sound was sweetest. Just at that moment, a woman dressed in her best Sabbath outfit pushed to the front of the crowd. "O King, I have the answer to your question." The king was surprised to see she didn't even have an instrument. "Why didn't you come earlier?" he asked. "I had to wait until just before the setting of the sun," said the woman. Sure enough, the sun was setting in the west, even as the musicians resumed their puffing, blowing, chiming and strumming. "Stop!" said the King, and all the musicians put down their instruments. The woman took out two candles and placed them on the balcony railing, lighting each one just as sun was setting. She lifted her voice and prayed, "Blessed art thou, O Lord, our God, King of the universe, who sanctified us by thy commandments, and commanded us to kindle the Sabbath lights." As she took her hands from her face, she said, "He that has ears to listen, let him hear." The king raised his head and said, "What? What is that?" He could not hear a sound. "What you hear is the sound of rest," she said. "And isn't the peace that the Sabbath brings the sweetest melody of all?"¹

How many of us here today have truly heard the sound of the Sabbath and felt the peace that it brings? Truth be told, we have trouble finding a moment's rest these days. Even our downtime is rushed into, hurried through, and left without a moment's thought. We don't stop to rest, not to mention taking time to consider how to honor the commandment to rest one day out of seven, and make it a holy and sacred rest.

Today, in the second of our three-part sermon series on the Purpose of Humanity, we look at our relationship with rest and work. In the Old Testament story of creation, after God created the heavens and the earth, it says:

"... 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. So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation."

Why did God rest? I mean, God is almighty and infinite – beyond time and space – so why would God need to rest? The answer is he wouldn't. The rest that God took – or to say it more accurately, the rest that God created – is part of creation. The result of God's act of creation is not only the stuff of the earth, but also the rhythm of life. And that rhythm is based on a pattern of rest and work, work and rest. This pattern of work and rest is so important in God's eyes that it formed the pattern of creation, as revealed to us in this creation story of the Bible.

The problem is from the beginning of time, human beings have struggled to live faithfully within the divine rhythm of creation, the rhythm of rest and work, work and rest. Oh, the work part is not a problem for us at all. We work ourselves to death. Even those who avoid work, they work really hard to do it, right?

But most people want to work. It's not only how God created us to be and what God commanded us to do, but it's engrained in us by society. As a society, we value – above all else – work and industriousness. And that's a good thing, to a certain extent. That's what makes the world go 'round. But work and industriousness is not the only thing. And the fact that we act as if it is, that's a problem.

Take for instance the man who started bringing work home every evening, so much so that he wasn't really "present" to his wife or his children. One night at bedtime his son asked, "Mommy, why does Daddy bring work home every night and then he can't be with us?" His mother explained that his father was behind in his work at the office. The boy thought about it and then said, "When I got behind in school, they put me in a slower group?"

Ever since God took man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it, we've been working ourselves to death. And that's because we fail to embrace the rhythm of rest and work, work and rest, a divine rhythm, given to us, as a gift of creation. What would it be like to truly have a sense of completion at the end of each day, the end of each week? I'm sure some know that feeling better than others. And yet, we all struggle to set aside our to-do list and take a holy rest from all our work and worry. But that spirit of rest what God wants for us.

God wants us to embrace the peace and stillness that comes from living in the rhythm of creation and enjoy it with no sense of worry or need. When God set us in the Garden of Eden to till it and keep it, he said, "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die."

The point is there are limits in life and we struggle with limits. We either take too much or not enough. We take too much time doing some things and not enough doing other things, things that would help us to strike a better balance. We think we know better than God when it comes to how we should use our time.

It's a trust issue. As Jesus says in the New Testament lesson that Vicky read, "... Do not keep striving for what you are to eat and what you are to drink, and do not keep worrying. ... Instead, strive for (the) kingdom (of God), and these things will be given to you as well." Rather than ending your day worrying about what's left to be done, trust in God to handle what's to come. God is already there ahead of you preparing that day's work and that day's rest. You dive into the one. Why not ease into the other? Why not enjoy and embrace a holy rest as the gift from God that it is.

Look, if you leave here with nothing else today, leave here knowing that as the beloved of God's creation, someone created to work and rest alongside God, day in and day out, as one week rolls into another, from one year to the next – as the beloved of God's creation there is nothing we need to worry about, nothing else we need to do when that time comes for us to take our daily rest.

God invites you into a holy rest each day, each week, and in doing so, God assures us that we've done enough, that we can freely rest, with a sense of peace in our hearts, and true contentment.

So, let us all set aside our worries, slow our frantic pace, temper our sense of need, and easy into a life lived in the rhythm of creation, a rhythm that is part of God's act of creation, when God rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Great God, today we simply come in gratitude. We pause to thank you for your provision, your care.

We do not take for granted the gift of home and food. We are so grateful for the love of family and community. We are thankful for this beautiful place to gather in your name, for here we are challenged, encouraged and reminded of who you are and what you have done.

We have been blessed with the fruit of your Spirit. We are thankful for the love, patience, kindness and gentleness of your Spirit. Continue your transforming work whereby we who have been loved will love; we with whom you have been patient will show patience; we to whom kindness has been shown will be kind; and we with whom you have been gentle will be gentle ourselves with all people.

We pray, also, your gentle spirit of comfort for those who grieve. We pray your spirit of healing and hope for those with illness and disease.

And we give you thanks, O God, for this day of Sabbath. We are grateful for its many blessings: for peace and joy, rest for the body, and refreshment for the soul.

May something of its meaning and message take new life in us today, lifting all that we do to a higher plane of holiness, and inspiring us to work with a new heart as followers of Jesus Christ, who taught us to pray together, saying:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts,

as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.