

“The Commandment” By Amanda A. Nevin
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Exodus 5:1-77; Exodus 20:8-11 and Exodus 31: 12-17

Shabbat or Sabbath simply means to cease or to rest. What is so important about Sabbath? Why is this command to rest in the list of the 10 Commandments and is the longest of the commandments themselves? For most Christians we do well to remember some of the commandments like, thou shall not: murder, lie, steal, covet but does it really matter that for most of us we break the 4th commandment remember the Sabbath and keep it holy more often than not? Does life really depend upon it? One could argue yes, life, our Christian life of faith should depend on our regular Sabbath keeping practices.

It is important to understand the context for the commandment themselves, especially number 4. For centuries the Israelites were under the hand of the Pharaoh, they were tasked to build his monuments, make him great, build him his own alter of worship and praise. It was at the expense of the Israelites that the Pharaoh amassed great wealth and power for himself and the Israelites we received none of the benefits of their hard work. In order to meet the Pharaoh’s demands the Israelites had to, tirelessly work without rest and worship for themselves. The Pharaoh is a cruel leader who asks much with nothing in return, in his demands he is unjust, unmerciful, unrelenting in his pursuit of wealth and uses whatever measure he can employ to get what he wants. While the Israelites were in Egypt the Pharaoh demanded endless production for an insatiable appetite of power, greed, wealth. While the Israelites were in Egypt every time that Moses came to the Pharaoh he asked him for one thing, a day to go and worship their God (as opposed to the Egyptian Gods) and every time Pharaoh made his demands harder for the Israelites to fulfill; “you shall no longer have straw provided to make the bricks, go gather the straw and still make the same quota of bricks;” the rhetoric is relentless. In a system like that there can be no Sabbath rest. The Israelites cry out, God sends Moses to free the people and after a head to head match with the Pharaoh the people are finally freed. Embedded in this narrative story is the fact that the God of Israel is a God who not only brings the people out of the land of Egypt, he is a God of rest. This commandment was given as a way to liberate the people from the gods of productivity and work and to reveal a new system of believing and living: one that was counter to the unrelenting workaholic demands of the Pharaoh. Thus the Sabbath commandment is drawn into this exodus narrative, for the God who rests after he is finished creating the universe is the same God who emancipates the people from slavery, and consequently from the working system of Egypt that required great work and unrest.

One could argue that we as Americans live in a model very similar to that of Egypt. The Pharaoh created a demand from the Israelites, he was relentless in his desire to amass more wealth, more power, more stuff, at the hands and at the expense of the Israelites. In many ways one could argue that our society, our economic system, our pursuit of stuff, by its very nature creates this overwhelming desire within people to amass more wealth, more power, have more stuff, and to live in to this cycle of feeling “endlessly restless, inadequate, unfulfilled, and in pursuit of that which we think may satiate our desires. Those requirements concern endless predation so that we are a society of 24/7 multitasking in order to achieve, accomplish, perform and possess. ” (Brueggemann, pg. xii). Our system of commodity requires that we want more, have more, own more, use more, eat and drink more and perpetually leaves us

feeling as if we are hamsters on a wheel, always striving to get somewhere until that magical golden day when we can “rest, slow down, and finally take life easy.” As Abraham Heschel a Jewish Rabbi describes it “In spite of our triumphs, we have fallen victims to the work of our hands; it is as if the forces we have conquered, have conquered us” (Heschel, p 27). And yet this never ending pursuit of the eternal hope that we can finally one day rest, leaves us exhausted, weary, feeling lonely, depressed, anxious and hopeless.

In to this system of hopeless weariness erupts the God who frees the people from slavery and sets before them a command to remember the Sabbath and make it holy! This God is a God of rest, wholeness, and compassion, He is unlike the Pharaoh that continually heaps on the unrelenting demands that are never satisfied. God invites all who are weary to come and to rest! This God who freed the Israelites is a God of mercy, steadfast love, and faithfulness. The Sabbath rest is an invitation to remember that we are not commodities to be used for endless production and relegated to a life caught trapped in an cycle of striving to obtain things, power, wealth, stuff simply to keep up with the so called demands/the pharaoh’s that our world creates for us today. When God gives Moses the 10 commandments it is with purpose and mindfulness. Each commandment God gives is to guard us against something that could harm our well-being, it is of the greatest importance to our welfare as people that God gives us these commandments.

Sabbath for the Israelites was a chance for them to become a people unlike the cultures around them, to live unlike they did in Egypt; to live in the freedom of a gracious God who set before them a new way of being, to be a people who worshipped, rested and celebrated their freedom from slavery and learned to trust that God who brought them out of Egypt would provide manna, quail and water in the desert was a Sovereign and holy God that would care for them long in to the future . Sabbath can become an act of both resistance to the culture around us and an alternative to a life draining meager existence that most of us feel we are living at times. Sabbath is resistance because it is a visible insistence that our lives are not defined by the production and consumption of commodity goods, nor it defined by how much we have, or how many activities we are involved with, we are defined by a loving God who longs for his people to have a relationship with him and with one another. We know the things that vie for our time, the sports activities, the after school activities, the work parties, the extra duties at work that might prompt a promotion, the maintenance of the house, the older parents to care for while managing small children, the balancing act of making time for a spouse while getting in the grocery shopping, the bills to pay, the cards to write, the phone calls to make, the doctors to visit and so. The seductive pressure to do more, be more, get more, have more is all around us. Learning to say no feels like an impossible task. Sometimes we make ourselves feel better by comparing our busy calendars and bragging about how “much” we have to do that day, week, month. As Walter Brueggemann says: “Sabbath is not only resistance, it is an alternative. It is an alternative to the demanding, chattering, pervasive presence of advertising and its great liturgical claim of professional sports that devour all our rest time. The alternative offer is the awareness and practice of the claim that we are situated on the receiving end of the gifts of God,” pg xiv). The Sabbath is supposed to be a gift to God’s people, a time where we say no to the Pharaoh’s of our day, and yes to God’s goodness and mercy, yes to the free gift of love and grace that is poured out for us, it isn’t another taxing thing that “have to do.” It is supposed

to be a liberating time in our week in which we can celebrate the glorious riches of God's grace through, family time together, taking a hike and praising God for his creation, eating a lavish meal with friends that takes more than hour where are wrapped in sheer enjoyment, merriment, laughter, sharing stories together as you break bread; spending time in prayer and praise as you get up slowly and enjoy nothing on your calendar! It is carved out sacred time in which we realize that we are not the sole being on earth by which everything revolves. It is a time in which we rely on God's sovereign hand to be in our midst and realize that the world existed long before I arrived and it will manage long after I am gone. When we begin to realize that we are not the center of the world, when we realize that not everything is a life and death situation, when we realize that saying no to the world's demands and yes to God we can grow deeper in our confidence of faith, we can grow deeper in our relationship with God, our faith not only becomes more meaningful, our relationships and friendships are enriched, our community of faith is strengthened, our lives are calmer, our priorities are clearer.

One of the things that I really appreciated about all the authors that I read on this subject during my own Sabbatical was the sense that Sabbath isn't just about coming to worship for an hour, or about sitting around on a Sunday afternoon twiddling your thumbs and staring at the walls. Sabbath is about our frame of mind, our heart, and our willingness to carve out time in our day and in our week to give to God. For Heschel he says this of Sabbath "the faith of the Jew (Christians) is not a way out of this world, but a way of being within and above the world; not to reject but to surpass civilization. The Sabbath is the day on which we learn the art of surpassing civilization" (p 27). Or in other words learning the art of saying no to the world's standards, the world demands of: be more, get more, have more, do more. Sabbath is a way for us as people to redefine how we can live and reclaim putting our faith at the center of all that we do and are. Sabbath is supposed to be first and foremost a celebration of the sovereignty of God and by that I mean that we understand that God is above all things and before all things that God knows all things past, present, and future and that God can do all things and accomplish all things. Nothing is too difficult for Him. This requires a deep abiding trust on our part that things will get done. The Israelites had to trust in the sovereignty of God. When God gave the Israelites the 4th commandment it was a way to celebrate God's goodness and grace, to set the people free to live an alternative life to the cultures around them; allowing them to live into a rhythm of joy, healing and wholeness which comes through rest, worship, play and focusing on our relationship with God. We can't do that if we are constantly on the move. Sabbath is supposed to be life giving, God centering, and a way for us to live into the freedom of Christ where we are not bound by the standards of this world, where we are not held in bondage or slavery to the false gods of be more, do more, have more. How liberating then is Sabbath supposed to be? How would our physical, emotional, mental and spiritual lives change if we took time to rest, renew and say no to the world around us? What might we be freed to do and be?