

S A B B A T H

K E E P I N G

It's About Time

J.D. WALT

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A SEEDBED SHORT

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## Reclaiming our time...

*It's a beautiful day in the neighborhood, a neighborly day in this beauty wood. Would you be mine? Could you be mine?*

He was a treasured guest in our childhood homes. First he went to the closet, where he exchanged his coat and shoes for a more comfortable sweater (knitted by his grandmother) and sneakers. Then he sang to us in a way that made us want to sing along. We boarded the Trolley and went on a journey, awakening our imagination to the land of make believe. We were treated to story time and games like show and tell.

He encouraged us to get in touch with our childhood feelings and gave us the freedom to play. All this happened under the carefree clock named Daniel, who had no hands. Not that we cared much about time then; it could be whatever time we wanted it to be. It is an overworked genre of literature, but a fitting book cries out to be written, *All I Really Needed to Know about Sabbath Keeping, I learned in Mr. Rogers Neighborhood.*

Our sense of time simultaneously reveals the most theological and practical reality in life. How do you tell time? What is your primary time-piece? Watch or calendar? Daytimer or PDA? Franklin-Covey time management system or iCal? Roman calendar or Christian calendar? Time remains the most egalitarian reality and precious commodity on Earth. We all have the same amount and yet none can get enough. We speak of managing time, saving time, wasting time and even killing time as though time were something within our control. And yet in reality, nothing exists more outside our control than time.

Note these well worn cultural observations...

In Soap Opera Speak:

*“Like Sands through the Hour Glass,  
so are the days of our lives.”*

In 70's speak:

*“If I could put time in a bottle.”*

Hear hymn-writer Isaac Watts:

*“Time like an ever rolling stream, soon bears us all away;  
we fly forgotten, as a dream dies at the opening day.”*

Benjamin Franklin opined that *time was money*.

Sixteen centuries ago St. Augustine posed the question:

*“What is time? Provided no-one asks me, I know.  
If I want to explain it to an inquirer I do not know.”*

We sing, speak, and lament so much about it, an objective observer might mistake time as our God. At minimum, I would venture to name time as the primary idol of our time.

“Indeed, the eighteenth century satirist Jonathan Swift suggested that clocks themselves were becoming gods of mercantile society. When Gulliver traveled to Lilliput, Swift recounted in his famous novel, the small inhabitants were puzzled by the ticking object that hung at his waist. ‘We conjecture,’ they reported, that ‘it is either some unknown Animal, or the God that he worships... But we are more inclined to the latter Opinion, because he assured us that he seldom did any Thing without consulting it... and said it pointed out the Time for every Action of his Life.’”<sup>1</sup>

So much of our attention focuses on time that the wristband around our left arm is called a *watch*. Meanwhile, Webster defines *watch* first as a verb: “to keep vigil as a devotional exercise,” and “to be attentive or vigilant.” Only much later in the sixth definition is *watch* defined as a portable timepiece designed to be worn or carried. “It is a great irony that monasteries—the very institutions from which we can learn so much about the practice of receiving the day—were pioneers in the development and use of clocks.

Because Benedictine monks were committed to praying at set hours during the course of each day, it was crucial to them to discover a way to call the community to prayer. And they did, inventing machines that governed the ringing of the clocca, or bells. When the clocca rang, they drew attention to the eternity of God and the brevity of human life.<sup>2</sup> The daily office is nothing more than a creative effort to make time an icon through which they saw and entered into the sufferings of Christ.

How might we recover a sense of time, whereby time itself leads us to be watchful of our God? The Psalmist observes, “Seventy years are given to us! Some may even reach eighty. But even the best of these years are filled with pain and trouble; soon they disappear, and we are gone.” And then this prayer, “Teach us to make the most of our time, so that we may grow in wisdom.”<sup>3</sup>

A book on spiritual formation for pastors would be remiss without both theological and practical reflection on the nature of time. Persons in ministry desperately need to recover an understanding of time as a reality to receive and embrace rather than a commodity to manage and control. At the foundation of time rests the reality of Sabbath. The aim of this essay, with the help of others, is to unpack the idea of Sabbath. Steering clear of the legalistic debris of both Jewish and Christian history, my hope is to unfold the practice of Sabbath as the wisdom of God.

Celebrated Jewish theologian, Abraham Heschel, writes:

“But time is the heart of existence... Judaism is a religion of time aiming at the sanctification of time... Judaism teaches us to be attached to holiness in time... The Sabbaths are our great cathedrals... One of the most distinguished words in the Bible is the word *qadosh*, holy; a word which more than any other is representative of the mystery and majesty of the divine.

Now what was the first holy object in the history of the world? Was it a mountain? Was it an altar? It is, indeed, a unique occasion at which the distinguished word *qadosh* is used for the first time: in the Book of Genesis at the end of the story of creation. How extremely significant is the fact that it is applied to time: ‘And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy.’ There is no reference in the record of creation to any object in space that would be endowed with the quality of holiness.”<sup>4</sup>

Hence the people of God, in all times and at all places, have been commanded to remember the Sabbath and to keep it holy. From the root command come three primary words: Remember, Sabbath and Holy. Taking these three ideas, I will outline a theology and practice of Sabbath keeping with the remainder of the essay.

# REMEMBER

“**REMEMBER** the Sabbath and keep it holy...”

Part one of the epic trilogy, *The Lord of the Rings*, begins with a narrator speaking these haunting words:

*“Much that once was is no longer for none now live who **remember** it.”*

On a visit to Asbury Seminary, a Native North American friend recounted a hunting story from his childhood. As he and his father trekked deeper and deeper into the forest, he became very afraid they were lost. Every few moments his Father would stop and look around, carefully studying the surroundings. After this had gone on a while, the son asked his father if they were lost. His father answered, “No, Son, we are not lost, because I have spent twice as much time paying attention to where we have been as to where we are going.”

The essence of **remembering** is paying attention to the journey along which one has traveled. The failure to **remember** inevitably leads to a deep sense of lostness and disorientation.

A couple of years ago, I toured the Yad Vashem Holocaust Museum in Jerusalem. From the seemingly obscure beginnings of the Arian movement through Hitler’s rise to power and on to the systematic extermination of six million Jews, the museum aims to lead people



on a pilgrimage of **remembrance**. As our tour ended, I noticed a small sign near the exit with these hopeful words:

“**Remembrance** is the secret to redemption.”

Entire histories are lost, and recurring cycles of doom are repeated—unless the past is faithfully **remembered**. **Remembering** keeps us narrated into the plotline of the larger story shaping our lives.

Is it any wonder the watchword of ancient Israel was **remember**.

“**Remember** the former things, those of long ago; I am God, and there is no other; I am God and there is none like me.” (Isaiah 46:9) Over and over again throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, the people of God **remember** their story:

From Creation down the spiraling staircase of sin to Babel, along the nomadic highway with Abraham and Sarah, climbing Mt. Moriah with Isaac, watering camels with Rebekah, wrestling at the river Jabok with Jacob, surprising starving brothers with Joseph. From Passover’s exodus to Red Sea’s deliverance to Sinai’s commandments and through the long wandering wilderness of temptation toward Jordan, Israel’s chief calling is to **remember** the God of their story.

Three times a year, the people of God drop everything and make pilgrimage to Jerusalem to **remember** and reenact their story through festival celebrations. Every week they observe the Sabbath. Every seventh year is a Sabbath where debts are forgiven and even the land gets to rest. And at the culmination of seven cycles of seven years, they celebrate a Jubilee where land ownership reverts back to God. In the interest of **remembering**, the Israelites commemorate covenants, build altars, stack stones, feast at festivals, cantor Psalms and celebrate Sabbaths. The

careful work of poets, priests and prophets all aim toward one end: **Remembering** the God of their story.

The late Rich Mullins wrote a marvelous narrative song detailing God's provision for Israel as they journeyed through the wilderness, **remembering** the pillar of cloud by day and of fire by night. The refrain repeats over and over, "And everywhere I go I see you."

This captures the Hebrew vision of a completely Godward life. In the sixth chapter of the book of Deuteronomy, a document constitutive of Israel's life and faith, are these words:

Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates. (Deuteronomy 6:4-9).

Israel shows us worship as an epic journey of **remembrance** into the future. Sadly, the exilic epitaph written over Israel's demise also boils down to one word: *Forgot*. Yet in the wake of Israel's failure comes one who **remembers** the story and inhabits it with imaginative fulfillment. The unfolding of Christ's fulfillment in the pattern of Israel's failure offers a stunning portrait of **remembrance**.

- Baptism at the Jordan River **remembers** Israel's entry into the land of promise.
- 40 days of Battling with the Devil **remembers** Israel's 40 year wandering in the wilderness.
- Feeding the multitudes on the hillside **remembers** God's provision of manna in the desert.

- The Sermon on the Mount **remembers** Moses on Mt. Sinai.
- On we could go to the crucifixion itself where the Exodus unfolds again when Jesus becomes the Paschal Lamb of God.
- In declaring a new covenant, Jesus offers the Bread and the Cup, saying “Do this in **remembrance** of me.”

The biblical idea of **remembrance** conveys a far deeper sense of meaning than the mere recall of past events. “Usually when the scripture uses the terms “**remember**” and “**remembrance**” with respect to worship, it does not imply a mental process but a ritual process. At the Eucharist, we **remember** Jesus not by quietly thinking about him but by doing what he did: Taking bread and the cup; giving thanks over them; breaking the bread; giving the bread and cup to those who seek to be Christian disciples.

This **remembrance** by *doing* rather than by *thinking* falls under the Greek term *anamnesis*. Compare amnesia. Amnesia is the loss of memory. *Anamnesis* is literally ‘the drawing near of memory,’ the entrance into our own experience of that which otherwise would be locked in the past.”<sup>5</sup>

“**Remember** the Sabbath and keep it holy...” The whole of Sabbath keeping might be summarized in the single word, **remember**. Sabbath opens space week after week after week to **remember** God’s Story, which reorients our reality, re-narrating us into the plot of redemption. Sabbath is God’s way of etching **remembrance** into the DNA of time. The secret to Sabbath begins not in patterns of behavior but in practices of memory.



“Remember the **SABBATH** and keep it holy...”

**Sabbath** keeping leads to a radical reorientation around the revolutionary reality of a God-shaped Universe and a Christ-centered life. The command to remember the **Sabbath** appears within the ten commandments.

Martin Luther once said, “Who knows the 10 commandments perfectly knows the entire Scriptures.” The Ten Commandments are listed in two places in the Bible and are in virtually identical format, except for one important difference: the rationale offered for keeping **Sabbath**. Recall the Exodus account of the **Sabbath** commandment:

“Remember the **Sabbath** day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a **Sabbath** to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates. For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the **Sabbath** day and made it holy.” (Exodus 20:8-11)

Now look at Deuteronomy's wording of the **Sabbath** commandment:

“Observe the **Sabbath** day by keeping it holy, as the Lord your God has commanded you. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a **Sabbath** to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your ox, your donkey or any of your animals, nor the alien within your gates, so that your manservant and maidservant may rest, as you do. Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the LORD your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the LORD your God has commanded you to observe the **Sabbath** day.” (Deuteronomy 5:12-15)

**Sabbath** keeping, like a double-edged sword, cuts to the heart of Christian faith: creation and restoration. We keep **Sabbath** as imitators of God, who created in six days and rested on the seventh. The **Sabbath** rhythm teaches us to rest from the creation work of our lives, in order to deepen our touch with the creative wonder of God. Mystical author, Dorothee Soelle, reminds us that the original state of creation was not fallenness, but blessing. She writes about the practice of radical amazement.

“I think that every discovery of the world plunges us into jubilation, a radical amazement that tears apart the veil of triviality. Nothing is to be taken for granted, least of all beauty!”<sup>6</sup>

Secondly, we keep **Sabbath** as a perpetual reminder of the horrors of slavery and the deliverance of God. For 400 years, God's people worked as Egyptian slaves without a day off. The **Sabbath** rhythm teaches us to rest from the hard work of our lives, that we might be reintroduced to freedom.

“Now what is the meaning of the **Sabbath** that was given to Israel? It relativizes the works of mankind, the contents of the six working days. It protects mankind from total absorption by the task of subduing the earth, it anticipates the distortion which makes work the sum and purpose of human life, and it informs mankind that he will not fulfill his humanity in his relation to the world which he is transforming but only when he raises his eyes above, in the blessed, holy hour of communion with the Creator... The essence of mankind is not work!”<sup>7</sup>

**Sabbath** keeping returns us to the cross where freedom flows from the blood of Jesus Christ. At the cross, we worship Jesus and are delivered from our propensity to become enslaved to created things. Paul exhorts the Church to live “in view of God’s mercy.”<sup>8</sup> **Sabbath** keeping provides a rhythmic journey, pausing again and again at scenic overlooks to gaze upon the stunning vista of mercy and grace.

Matt Redman, in his book, *Face Down*, captures the essence of it all with this word:

“When our eyes are opened to the big picture, and we catch a greater glimpse of God, we are awestruck. The otherness of God, His wonderful mysteries, the view of the whole Christ, the song of creation and the sound of sheer silence all lead us in one direction—awe. Facedown worshippers found throughout scripture all have one thing in common—an awesome view of God.”<sup>9</sup>



“Remember the Sabbath and keep it **HOLY**...”

I have served in ministry now for 20+ years. Until recent times, Sabbath keeping has been a tremendous struggle. Why? Because my idea of Sabbath was bound in pragmatic and utilitarian motives. Once, while teaching a seminar on this subject, a man raised his hand and in an irritating fashion queried me, “What’s the point of all this theology and philosophy about time!” Like so many of us, he only wanted the bottom line: how do I do it? In reality, he wanted to know the secrets to having a better day off.

For about a dozen years, my practice of Sabbath was the quest for a productive day off. Citing the authority of Jesus’ statement about Sabbath being for man and not the other way around, I claimed the day as “my time.” It was free time; alone time, time for running errands and getting other needful stuff done; a time to work on my personal “to do” list. It began when I woke up and ended at bedtime.

As a person in ministry, it was next to impossible to take Sabbath on Sunday, so I elected Fridays. In reality, I bounced around through the week—and half of the time, the demands of work kept me from taking a Sabbath at all. When a consistent day didn’t work I reasoned an occasional Sabbath retreat would suffice. After all,

in the New Testament reality, Sabbath didn't have to be a day. It could be an "ethic." In retrospect, despite all my best efforts to fill Sabbath with refreshment, it proved only a brief escape from the stressful pace of life and ministry.

As the long, treadmill like journey to burnout continued I began to study and teach on the biblical idea of Sabbath. As they say, one teaches best what they need most. Here is what I learned about keeping Sabbath **holy**:

**Lesson #1:** Sabbath is a consistent weekly observance of a day (24 hour period) of rest.

Someone once said, "God created days but people created hours." The Psalmist prays, "Teach me to order my days aright that I may gain a heart of wisdom." Perhaps Sabbaths never measured up for me before because they only amounted to twelve hours at best. In keeping with the notion of creation days in Genesis 1, Sabbath begins in the evening. "And there was evening and there was morning; a second day." The evening to morning pattern unfolds a theological reality.

"This Hebrew evening/morning sequence conditions us to the rhythms of grace. We go to sleep, and God begins his work. As we sleep he develops his covenant. We wake and are called out to participate in God's creative action. We respond in faith, in work. But always grace is previous and primary. We wake into a world we didn't make, into a salvation we didn't earn. Evening: God begins, without our help, his creative day. Morning: God calls us to enjoy and share and develop the work he initiated."<sup>10</sup>

There is something profoundly refreshing about the first major act of the day being bedtime. Waking up ceases to be an exercise in "jumpstarting" the day, and it becomes an "entering into" the work God has already begun.



**Lesson #2:** Sabbath needs a clearly defined beginning and ending.

In traditional Jewish practice, the Sabbath begins at sundown on Friday with the lighting of a special candle and the recitation of a prayer. A well-constructed, experiential ritual declares reality like nothing else. Our family begins Sabbath either at the evening meal or as we put our children to bed. We gather around and light that we call the “Sabbath Candle,” reserved only for this day each week. Together we say the “Sabbath Prayer” we composed:

*God give us your peace and cause us to rest.  
We cease from our labor. We seek for your best.  
Embracing each other, we walk in your ways.  
We thank you for giving this new Sabbath day.*

As the candle begins to flicker, I feel as though I’ve crossed the finish line on the week and am entering into a victory celebration. In like fashion, at bedtime the following day, we enjoy a time of “Sabbath Closing.” The children wrestle over blowing out the candle as we move into a new week of life and work.

**Lesson #3:** Sabbath is not preparation for the week ahead, but celebration of the week behind.

Rest, in the typical way of thinking, prepares us for the next task. Rest leads to re-fueling.

“Aristotle says relaxation is not an end but is rather for the sake of activity; for the sake of gaining strength for new efforts. To the biblical mind, however, 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. Man is not a beast of burden, and the Sabbath is not for the purpose of enhancing the efficiency of his work. Last in creation, first in intention, the Sabbath is, the end of the creation of heaven and earth. The Sabbath is not for the sake of the weekdays; the weekdays are for the sake of the Sabbath. It is not an interlude but the climax of living.”<sup>11</sup>

Through her book, *Keeping Sabbath Wholly*, Marva Dawn proves a treasured teacher on Sabbath:

“Sabbath resting is a foretaste of eternal life... For that reason part of our Sabbath celebration is a prayer that we might someday come to the fulfillment of the Sabbath... When we live for our Sabbaths, when they are the climax of our weeks, we know a healthy anticipation of the ultimate rest, the time when Jesus will come to take us home.”<sup>12</sup>

**Lesson #4:** Sabbath is not about dos and don'ts, but rather about a wholistic way of being in God's presence.

Unfortunately, much Sabbath practice throughout the ages revolves more around construing the meaning of the word “work” and misconstruing the meaning of the word “holy.” Dawn helpfully outlines Sabbath as a day of four **holy** practices: ceasing, resting, feasting, and embracing.

### **Ceasing**

Our word, Sabbath, derives from the Hebrew word *Shabbat*. It means to cease. The starting point for Sabbath resides simply in stopping.

“To cease working on the Sabbath means to quit laboring at anything that is work. Activity that is enjoyable and freeing and not undertaken for the purpose of accomplishment qualifies as acceptable for Sabbath time.”<sup>13</sup>

Sabbath is a day to exalt *being* over *doing*. One of the great temptations of Sabbath lies in trading one “to-do” list for another. Needful household projects and unfinished daily chores cry out for completion. While it feels satisfying to check these things off the list, to persist in doing them violates the spirit of ceasing. The most subtle distortions in self worth creep in through the inability to feel good about oneself without accomplishment. Sabbath provides a tangible way of realizing that God loves us not because of what we do or accomplish. And this sets us free to love others in the same way.

Perhaps the supreme act of faith in our time would be to hide one’s “to do” list. To cease affirms faith that God’s will isn’t dependent on our doing; that the World will go on without our constant contributions. Hebrew Scholar Matitihu Tsevat has written,

“The basic meaning of the biblical Sabbath is an acceptance of the sovereignty of God. In it, the Israelite renounces his autonomy and affirms God’s dominion over him.”<sup>14</sup>

Remember Israel’s wilderness season. They did not gather manna on the Sabbath, but they collected two days worth on the preceding day. Ceasing re-establishes connection with the rhythm of creation weeks: six days on and one day off. As Sabbath begins, I put my briefcase, laptop computer, palm pilot and anything else reminding me of work in a closet. Finally, I place my watch in a drawer and prepare to embrace Shabbat.

## Resting

“On the seventh day, having finished his task, God rested from all his work.”<sup>15</sup> Pastor and theologian, Eugene Peterson, describes Sabbath as that uncluttered time and space in which we can distance ourselves from our own activities enough to see what God is doing. He suggests if we are not able to rest one day a week, we may be taking ourselves far

too seriously.<sup>16</sup> The Psalmist reminds us to “Be still and know that I am God.”<sup>17</sup> Throughout the centuries, Rabbis have speculated that God created rest on the seventh day. “What was created on the seventh day. ‘Tranquility, serenity, peace and repose.’” (Genesis rabba 10:9.)

Martin Luther, speaking on Sabbath, said,

“The spiritual rest which God especially intends in this commandment is that we not only cease from our labor and trade, but much more—that we let God alone work in us and that in all our powers do we do nothing of our own.”<sup>18</sup>

Rather than succumbing to the temptation to define rest, it must be left to the creative imagination of individuals, families and communities. Finding rest can easily become a tiring activity in itself—for one person’s rest is another’s tiring activity. True rest resides in the province of surrender. Like green pastures and still waters, real rest deeply restores and is a place to which only God can lead.

Wendell Berry captures the essence of Sabbath in his poetry:

“The mind that comes to rest is tended  
In ways that it cannot intend:  
Is borne, preserved, and comprehended  
By what it cannot comprehend  
Your Sabbath Lord, thus keeps us by  
Your will, not ours. And it is fit  
Our only choice should be to die  
Into that rest, or out of it.”<sup>19</sup>

Dawn summarizes,

“The Sabbath rhythm of resting leads to an ethics of *becoming* (how our character is being developed) and not of *doing* (how we react in specific situations)... Resting provides the necessary time for the Spirit’s molding of our characters.”<sup>20</sup>

## Feasting

Every Sabbath morning our family enjoys a feast. After my cup of coffee, I usually hear our 4 children (ages 11, 9, 7 & 6) begin to chant, “Sabbath pancakes, Sabbath pancakes!”

Ordinary pancakes, through ritual celebration, have become an extraordinary feast. So special have pancakes become that once when a baby sitter tried to cook pancakes on a weekday morning, our two year old insisted that pancakes were only for the Sabbath.

Feasting, a lost art in our culture of abundance, has become primarily about eating more. The essence of feasting is not quantity but quality. But we cannot talk about feasting without a discussion on fasting. A day set apart for the unbridled enjoyment of special foods invites a new understanding of fasting in the week.

Because our idea of feasting is quantity driven so is our practice of fasting. After all, if feasting implies “all you can eat” then fasting demands complete abstinence. But what if fasting moved beyond either-or categories? Might we be led away from our “living to eat” idolatry, joining the rest of the world in an “eating to live” lifestyle. Our every day diet could become a form of fasting whereby we stood in solidarity with those whose diet is not about choice but scarcity.

“When we are not forced to live simply, we lose track of the wonder of God’s provision.”<sup>21</sup>

So much of our time is wasted on deciding where to eat and then what to eat when we get there. Food commands our focus because it delivers a ready alternative to fill our emptiness. Feasting enables one to embrace the living God in the gift of provision, no matter its quality or quantity. Getting beyond food, feasting invites guilt-free enjoyment of everything beautiful.

Dawn develops the idea of feasting on affection, where we enjoy solitude with God, community with friends, and intimacy in marriage. Sabbath affords me space to read and write poetry, supplying a feast of beauty. Finally, Sabbath reminds us that bread alone will never satisfy the appetite that craves feasting on the Word of God.

## **Embracing**

“Tell the people of Israel to keep my Sabbath day, for the Sabbath is a sign of the covenant between me and you forever.”<sup>22</sup>

To celebrate Sabbath is to embrace the Triune God of grace.

“Most of the days of the week we do what we have to do, what is expected of us. Sabbath keeping frees us to take delight in everything, to uncork our own spontaneity. Because there is nothing we have to do, we are suddenly free to say yes to invitations, to read fairy tales, to be children, to discover the presence of God hidden all around us. To keep the Sabbath invites us to have festival fun, to play, to enjoy our guests and our activities, to relish the opportunity for worship, to celebrate the eternal presence of God himself. We feast in every aspect of our being—physical, intellectual, social, emotional, spiritual—and we feast with music, beauty, food, and affection. Our bodies, minds, souls, and spirits celebrate together with others that God is in our midst.”<sup>23</sup>

Through ceasing, resting, and feasting, Sabbath teaches us the art of embracing. It is the indistinguishable love of God and neighbor.

When Jews who have become inattentive to their religion wish to deepen their observance, rabbi's tell them with one voice: “You must begin by keeping Shabbat. More than the Jews have kept Shabbat, Shabbat has kept the Jews.”<sup>24</sup>

Eugene Peterson, in a letter written to his congregation, warns us all:

“The world is in a conspiracy to steal our Sabbath. It is a pickpocket kind of theft (nothing like an armed robbery) and we aren’t aware of it until long after its occurrence. The ‘world’ is sometimes our friends, sometimes our families, sometimes our employers—they want us to work for them, not waste time with God, not be our original selves. If the world can get rid of Sabbath, it has us to itself. What it does with us when it gets us is not very attractive: after a few years of Sabbath breaking we are passive consumers of expensive trash, and anxious hurriers after fantasy pleasures. We lose our God and our dignity at about the same time. That is why I want you to keep a Sabbath. Guard the day. Protect the leisure for praying and playing.”<sup>25</sup>

Sabbath gracefully reconnects us to God in a magnificent storied fashion. Jurgen Moltmann says, “The Sabbath opens creation to its true future.”<sup>26</sup> The Sabbath may be the central design in the tapestry of time. It is at minimum the wisdom of God. Let us, therefore, labor to, “**Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy.**”

*Breathe*

rest in Rest,  
holy Leisure—  
airtight Time:  
Sabbath.  
hearing Ears,

Creation slowing—  
open Eyes:  
Sabbath.  
guiltless Feasting,

sacred Rhythms—  
Heaven Hugging:  
Sabbath.

Nothing-doing  
Nowhere-going—  
Work unknowing:  
Sabbath.

John David Walt



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- <sup>12</sup> Dawn, Marva. *Keeping Sabbath Wholly* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Erdmann's, 1989), 62.
- <sup>13</sup> Dawn, Marva. *Keeping Sabbath Wholly*, 5.
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>15</sup> Genesis 2:2
- <sup>16</sup> Peterson, "The Pastor's Sabbath." *Leadership*, (Spring 1985), 53.
- <sup>17</sup> Psalm 46:10
- <sup>18</sup> Martin Luther, *A Treatise on Good Works*, (Philadelphia: A.J. Holman Company, 1915), pp.173-285, part 2, xvii
- <sup>19</sup> Wendell Berry, *A Timbered Choir: The Sabbath Poems*, (New York, New York: Counterpoint Press, 1999), 7.
- <sup>20</sup> Dawn, 96-97.
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>22</sup> Exodus 31:13
- <sup>23</sup> Dawn, *Keeping Sabbath Wholly*, 98.
- <sup>24</sup> Dorothy Bass, *Practicing our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People* (Indianapolis, Indiana: Jossey-Bass, 1998), 79-80.
- <sup>25</sup> Confessions of a Former Sabbath Breaker. *Christianity Today*. Sept. 2, 1988.
- <sup>26</sup> Jurgen Moltmann, *God in Creation.* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993), 276.

This Seedbed Short is adapted from a chapter authored by J.D. Walt in the book, “The Pastor’s Guide to Personal Spiritual Formation,” published by Beacon Hill Press. The book contains a range of essays from authors including Marjorie Thompson, Bill Hybels, Robert Mulholland, Steve Harper and others. Seedbed heartily commends this work to you. You will find it at any of the major online booksellers or visit Beacon Hill Press online to learn more.



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