

I said last week that the giving of the Law in the context of the story of the Exodus highlights the way in which God renews the collective soul of the people after the shattering, dehumanizing experience of slavery. This week we zoom in to the first specific commandments, and I think we'll see that they create an orientation to life that is designed to keep us free and help us realize fullness of being.

The call to exclusivity—"you shall have no other gods before me"—is an assertion that, as Jesus said, we cannot serve two masters. Martin Luther wrote, "A god means that from which we are to expect all good and to which we are to take refuge in all distress ... That now, I say, upon which you set your heart and put your trust is properly your god." So from the very start, we know that we can't have it all. Either we orient ourselves around the God of these commandments, or we orient ourselves around something else from which we expect all good and in which we put all our trust. Sometimes the choice takes place in a really granular way, when we could either compromise our values for some very tempting gain OR not, and lose that opportunity. More often it's subtle, a matter of where our attention drifts and where we invest our energies, and we're not necessarily aware that we're not alert to the presence or gracious potentialities of God from day to day.

It seems to me that the Sabbath is the practice that keeps us grounded. In the same way that Muslims pray five times a day so as to correct course and remind themselves what's important, so the rest every seventh day is intended to bring our minds back to the God who created the Sabbath, who created the earth and our very lives, and who wants us to take a break so as to come back to earth and get our

heads on straight. The Sabbath is an intrusion into daily life, an intrusion of grace.

My students always have trouble appreciating the commandment to observe the Sabbath, even after I explain that it's not meant the way the Puritans saw it, with hours of worship and sitting around listening to someone read the Bible. Even after I explain that you're supposed to eat a nice meal with the people you love, and rest and play games, they wonder how in the world you could get everything done if you sidelined yourself for 24 hours a week. But of course that's the point. If the only way to get it done is to do it on the Sabbath, you have to shift your priorities. And while there's a serious case to be made that our society is built in such a way that some people really can't survive without working on the Sabbath, a lot of us have more choice than we realize. Dorothy Bass writes,

"I was out to dinner with my husband and another couple, and we were whining about all the papers we were going to be grading together on Sunday, sort of whining, but also sort of boasting," Bass recalled. "It just sort of hit me that with any of the other commandments this group would not be sitting around whining, 'Gee, I've got to commit adultery tomorrow.'" <http://www.beliefnet.com/faiths/2000/08/sabbath-chic.aspx#pq12EWoArc0mC7Jc.99>

They were whining about how busy they were, as if they couldn't afford to take Sunday off, but the subtext was that they were super-important and responsible. They were so invested in that aspect of their identities that they were turning down the gift of the Sabbath.

You don't know what you don't know. And I think the hidden cost of trying to be "on" all the time is that we fail to get ideas or insights that would come if we were more reflective. Rabbi Arthur Waskow wrote some years ago that "Shabbat betokens the peace agreement ending the primordial war between ourselves and

earth which began as we left Eden.” <http://www.aril.org/waskow.htm> That is, in our time, Sabbath keeping means making room in our lives for being in the natural world in such a way that we are able to come to a deeper understanding of our dependence on that natural world.

He writes,

That swiftness[of technological change], to some extent throughout human history but with utter urgency today, gives the human race a mandate unique among all species: to act as if it were a steward for the planet. If we fail in this task, the planet's ruination will take us with it. In that sense, we are strange stewards, for we remain partially embedded in the earth we steward.

What is the alternative to ruination? . . . It is the bringing of restfulness and reflectiveness to a deeper level, just as work has been brought by modernity to a higher level. It is extending our love to the whole of the earth of which we are a part, without denying our uniqueness in its web of life.

Now that we live in the era of high-tech industrialism, and are not shepherds or farmers or foresters in the ordinary sense, we must learn to be shepherds, farmers, tree-keepers again in a different sense. For shepherds, farmers, and orchard-keepers knew you must not exhaust the earth you live on. If you're a shepherd and you let the sheep eat all the grass in one year, the sheep may be fatter and the wool thicker, but you're finished off. And farmers, vintners, and orchard-keepers learn the same thing.

Arthur Waskow is saying that technology can develop *without* people being reflective, but it will destroy ourselves and the earth. Only people who have a wider angle of vision can see that we need to take the time to waste time in order to operate on a deeper level and stop all the quick fixes that ultimately make things worse. Just as a trivial example, after a busy Sunday afternoon last week, Tom and I raced to Patti's house, ate ourselves silly, and then in the car home talked about how we should have brought reusable plates and cutlery. Well, we know that, but we were just busy enough that the thought didn't have a chance to get our attention. Being in the habit of being busy makes us not realize that we're rushing. I think we

overlook things or fail to recognize the seeds of more profound ideas all the time because we do not honor the very wise commandment to just stop, for a significant span of time, every week. It nurtures a habit of attention and recollection.

It's counter-intuitive to think that we might live better and contribute more to the world if we forced ourselves to be unproductive at times. But I guess that's why God gave the commandment, because we weren't going to just naturally do that. Sabbath observance is a discipline that gradually forms our spirits. Unless we make space—significant, costly space—in our lives, how can God speak to us and call us where we did not plan to go?

Let us pray.

O God, we yearn to find the ways of keeping the Sabbath that will truly reorient us toward you and ground us in your Reality. Bless our attempts, and encourage us as we seek you, for the vision of your reign is calling to us always, and we want to live in that reality. Amen.