

“A TIME TO WORK, A TIME TO REST”

Ecclesiastes 3:1-9; Exodus 5:1-9

February 6, 2022

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“The reason Miriam and the other women can sing and dance at the end of the exodus narrative is the emergence of new social reality in which the life of the Israelite economy is no longer determined and compelled by the insatiable production quotas of Egypt and its gods” (p.5). Walter Brueggemann made this observation in his book *Sabbath as resistance*. When Moses first approached Pharaoh, he was just asking for the day off. But Pharaoh had become dependent on the Hebrew slaves. Their work supported a massive building campaign and had enriched his treasury greatly. He could have easily afforded to give them the time off, but he and his gods were demanding. Maximizing profit and therefore production were his chief goals.

This story looks strangely familiar. We have workers in our economy for whom a day off jeopardizes their employment. The unemployed are often accused of “being lazy.” The drive for better production among some employers reaches irrational proportions. In the years of “down-sizing,” employees were given more work to do in the same amount of time with the expectation that they would produce more benefit. The balance of power has shifted dramatically over the last fifty years in the direction of employers. A NY Times article observed that most employers were choosing to maintain part-time employment even though many people are seeking full-time opportunities.

The gods of Egypt have much in common with the gods of the twenty-first century. They demand work. They demand sacrifice. And all efforts to set it aside for a day are criticized. Even many workers prefer this arrangement. Overtime means more money to buy the things I want, things that make my life worthwhile and comfortable. I’ve known a few to put off retirement because they don’t know what they’d “do” with all that time.

Miriam suggests that they might try singing and dancing a little. Israel’s God expects something else besides work all the time. There is no endless sacrifice to appease this God. Moses will liberate them from the Egyptian economy and replace it with a different vision. At Sinai, the Ten Commandments will place at the hinge between the commandments relating to God and those relating to neighbor, the commandment to rest, to honor the Sabbath. Six days you shall work and on the seventh, you shall rest. Six days God created the world and on the seventh rested from all the work.

The implication of this placement is that when we cease from our labor, we are afforded an opportunity to see the connections between love of God and neighbor. It’s not just the rhythm of moving between work and rest that is healthier, but some important things happen to us when we stop working.

Brueggemann argues that when we rest from our labor, we are able to rest from the anxiety that builds up around our work life; the anxiety that was pushing us to work all the

time. When we rest, we resist the pressure of our culture to be all about work, we reject the priority of our society to accumulate wealth beyond our need. When we rest, we become more open to see and welcome our neighbor. We see the divided attention that multi-tasking creates.

The preacher from Ecclesiastes seems to recognize the futility of a life completely focused on work. After a beautiful poetic passage about the rhythms that belong to life, he asks, "What gain have the workers from all their toil?" Missing from his list is "a time to work and a time to rest." And yet he seems very much aware that life is about more than work. He goes to say, "I know there is nothing better for [workers] than to be happy and to enjoy themselves as long as they live; moreover it is God's gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil."

To work without rest is to get lost in one's work, to lose the sense of God's intent for our lives. To work without rest is to lose perspective on the work that we do. When we work all the time, we might easily imagine that work is about accumulating resources, or producing product, or maximizing profit, or building self-esteem or being constructive. Work is about using the gifts God has given us to serve the interests of others.

This is the time for work, the work God does in creating light, in separating the light from the dark, in forming the dry land, in producing vegetation, in filling the oceans with creatures of the sea and the air with birds, and the land with creatures of all sorts. This is not work designed to line God's coffers, not work to fill the spaces of boredom, not work that brings merely personal benefit. It is work that serves creation and those who will come to inhabit it.

WE don't expect that God needs rest to maintain perspective, But God does and not just on the seventh day but also at the end of some days. God pauses and sees that creation is "good."

This is the time for rest: to pause and reflect on the goodness of the earth, of the community, of others. Rest is a time for seeing that God has been active in the days of your work. It is a time for recognizing the goodness and love of God. It is a time for seeing one's neighbors, acknowledging their status as children of God, and remembering their need. It is a time to return to the grace of God, to welcome the nurturing presence of God, to sing and to dance at the goodness of God.

There are times when we are just working for the paycheck, but these are not generally happy times. Living in the so-called "rat race" is exhausting. I've talked to other pastors during this pandemic who are exhausted. So many stopped taking vacations for a while because it felt like abandoning their congregations. So many grew weary of what was essentially maintenance ministry, just trying to hold things together. Thankfully many of these pastors are now returning to rhythms that include rest.

The church is in a good place to model the importance of holding work and rest together. In our ministry, we can demonstrate the kind of work that serves others and the world. In

those sacred times when we rest in God's grace: handing our burdens over to God in prayer, offering up hymns of praise, gathering in worship and fellowship, or just sitting in silence, we affirm for ourselves and others God's intent for life to be good and abundant.

It's not as much a balance between them, but a rhythm where work informs rest and rest informs our work. This rhythm helps us say "no" to the gods of this world, reminding us to value people over profits, forgiveness over vengeance, service over success, a deep and abiding peace over the adrenalin rush of the moment and the God of love over the demanding gods of sacrifice and retribution.

Let us be a people free of the irrational demands of Pharaoh, and welcome the God who has given us a time to work and a time to rest. Amen.

Resources:

Brueggemann, Walter. *Sabbath as resistance: Saying NO to the CULTURE OF NOW*. Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, KY. 2014