

*Based on Exodus 23:10-11 and Deuteronomy 15, selected verses. Introducing The Sabbatical Year*

A colleague of mine in the ministry likes to share a story from a retreat she once led on “Discerning Your Call.” A random cross-section of humanity had signed up for a time “away” to think deep thoughts and rediscover one’s purpose in life ... or at least for the moment. An hour into the retreat, once the ice had been broken and trust had been established, came the heartfelt holding of space for truth-telling at what we like to call the “soul-ular” level. Around the circle, retreatants spoke to their sense of call in that moment:

I think I may be called to motherhood, whispered one ... who had better get a move on if her biological clock had anything to say about it.

I am called to forestry, another said boldly, admitting he would disappoint his parents by dropping out of law school, but could no longer go on living a lie.

I am called to an interesting shade of blue, sang the artsy fartsy type in the room, confusing everyone around him, even to this day.

Around the circle they went, call after call they shared, until finally, the last one to speak, although she took a very long time even after it was clear it was her turn, with a sigh that nearly flickered out the candle illuminating the circle, with a voice emerging from within the many layers of her grandmother’s quilt still wrapped around her long-limbed frame, finally, the last one to speak said:

I am called to deep rest.

The room fell silent. The kind of silence that comes on the other side of hearing the voice of God booming from the burning bush of Moses. I am called ... to deep ... *rest*.

It turns out we *all* are. Called to deep rest, I mean. At least if our Lesson for today has anything to say about it. And not just us, but workers at every level of economic life ... from janitors to CEOs ... from day laborers to agribusiness conglomerates ... from school teachers to (yes) students ... from Bill Gates to the Amazon package stuffer who starts Monday morning in Martinsburg.

We are all called *to rest!*

And not just humans, I mean. At least if our Lesson for today has anything to say about it. The animals, too, are called to deep rest. The race horses and the work horses ... the hunting dogs and the seeing-eye dogs ... the pack animals and the show animals ... the guard animals and the treatment animals.

We are all called *to rest!*

And not just the creatures of the earth. *The earth itself* is called to deep rest: For six years, the teaching of Exodus proclaims, you shall sow your land and gather in its yield; *but the seventh year you shall let it rest.*

No tractors or combines. No bulldozers or backhoes. No asphalt pavers or trench rollers. No airplanes. No cars.

We tried this, of course, those fifteen days of lockdown in March of 2020. Remember? A forced sabbatical to keep COVID at bay. In just two weeks, we saw the divine realignment of earth! Polluted canals in Venice clearing up, as motorboat traffic shut down. Polluted skies in Los Angeles losing their smog, as 12-lane highways sported nary a vehicle. Wild turkeys walking the sidewalks of Baton Rouge, with no fear of turning into Thanksgiving dinner. Himalayan peaks visible in Indian cities for the first time in thirty years. Just two weeks of deep rest initiating a truly divine realignment of the earth and all that is in it!

Eighteen months later, we can see why the Sabbatical Year ... for humans ... has to be turned into a commandment: We cannot handle the call to deep rest!

And not just because we need the paycheck. Even those of us with resources are tragically unrehearsed in living with joy ... instead of compulsion ... the gift of this good earth ... promising abundant life for all ... and not just for the few.

We are afraid. Will there really be enough? Will I lose what I have worked so hard to build up? Have I earned it? Do I deserve it?

We are caught up in monkey-mind. That Buddhist concept of all the crazy that goes on between our ears, *even when* we have enough, and have earned it, and deserve it, and will not lose it. As one of my favorite teachers says, “The mind is a dangerous neighborhood. Never go there by yourself.”

Truly, we struggle with the call to deep rest. Even the yoga teacher will tell you that *savasana*, the corpse pose, the yoga of rest, is the hardest pose of all to teach.

No wonder we have spent our COVID enforced so-called sabbatical year and a half to-date binge-watching Netflix, frantically upgrading all of our technology, doomscrolling the news and our social media accounts, anxiously awaiting a return to some semblance of normal.

That is *not* what our Lesson from Exodus has in mind.

The whole point of the call to deep rest, or in a better translation of the Hebrew – *Shmita* – the whole point of the call to *sabbatical release*, is to bring that heartfelt vision of a time when all has been healed and all has been forgiven and all has been made well *into a tangible reality*. Not sometime in the sky by and by, but *on earth, right now*, as it is in heaven.

For one entire year, the vision from our Lesson says, you will simply stop. Just stop. And as you stop, for one entire year, you will start to notice what has been going on all around you all that time that you were too busy to see when you were so hard at work. And as you start to notice, you will realign your values.

For one entire year, when you see who is hungry, you will give them some food, no questions asked. For one entire year, when you see who's in debt up to their eyeballs, you will find a way to pay it off, no questions asked. For one entire year, when you see someone who is caught up in a cycle of systemic poverty and has no bootstraps left to pull themselves out, you will cash out your 401(k) and buy them a house, no questions asked. For one entire year, you will find a twenty-first century way to let the land lie fallow; release indentured servants; forgive debts; share private land with the commons; and freely distribute stored food and harvests.

Or, if you happen to be the one who is hungry or in debt up to your eyeballs, or caught up a cycle of systemic poverty, for one entire year, you can expect – and even *demand!* – to be released from your burden!

This is what life is all about, Lutheran scholar and teacher Daniel Erlander says about the Sabbatical year: Friendship with God. Friendship with one another. Friendship with this good earth we call home. Re-aligning ourselves with the fundamental truth that everything we think we “own” really belongs to God. And to stop holding so tightly to those things as if they could ever *become* our god.

Christian tradition has not, to our detriment, incorporated the Sabbatical Year into contemporary life and practice. In fact, scholars of ancient Israel debate whether our biblical forebears even actually practiced this commandment from our shared Scriptures. In recent years, however, Israeli Judaism has reclaimed the teaching for modern life, with some degree of success. And while Jewish practices of the Sabbatical Year are restricted specifically to the land of Israel-Palestine, Jews around the world are invited to reflect on how to support those practices from afar.

As Providence would have it, Jewish tradition just began a Sabbatical Year on September 7, 2021. We, who share this part of the biblical tradition, do well to learn from their example. The Divine Realignment is upon us, especially with the rise of the Delta variant. The cry of the earth itself for release from human exploitation echoes through the universe. We have a window ... a very narrow window, according to global scientists ... to figure out how to be made well. The Jewish Sabbatical Year gives us a framework to practice doing just that.

And for our SPC family that we are continuing to create and co-create together, this Divine Realignment, this invitation to deep rest with God, with one another, with the earth ... serves an even more poignant purpose. I hold in my soul this deep lament for all we have lost these past eighteen months. This was supposed to be a precious time of bonding and trust-building between pastor and people, of getting to know one another and blending our shared hopes and dreams and visions into a cohesive whole.

We did what we had to do. We are so incredibly grateful for all who stepped up to keep some semblance of community connected. Truly, this could have been so much worse.

But there are so many of you I still do not know, and I really do want to know. I want to welcome you into my home and be welcomed into yours. I want to hear your stories and your hopes and your dreams and your sadness, and I want to share mine with you in return. I want to be your pastor in the only real way I know how to be a pastor ... which is all about the ministry of *presence*.

Honestly, from where I stand, if all we do this year as a congregation is hit the re-set button, that will be enough. That will be our version of cultivating the call to deep rest.

Which is, I do truly believe, the call for us all. Not necessarily to quit school or stop working or sell all we own and give it to the poor. (Although it may very well mean some of us do those things!) But maybe something more like what Puppet Jesus encouraged for our children: to think about those things differently. That the point of it all is to live in joyful friendship with God, with one another, and with this earth we call home.

If we say yes to *that* kind of call to deep rest, beloveds, we cannot help but rejoice in the Divine Realignment that truly will save us all.

Let the church say, Amen!