

Union Small Groups. Fall 2023

An Invitation to Sabbath Rest.

Is this possible?

A four-week study of scripture in dialogue with others

Week One: Sabbath Rest as RECEIVING & REJOICING.

Week Two: Sabbath Rest as REMEMBRANCE

Week Three: Sabbath Rest as RESISTANCE

Week Four: Sabbath Rest as RESTORATION

Introduction to your Invitation to Sabbath Rest

Sabbath [Shabbat in Hebrew]: To cease from work/labor, to pause, to rest, to celebrate.

To keep Sabbath in our culture of 24/7 commitments and technology that can keep us incessantly linked to anyone anywhere in the world is challenging and countercultural.

To keep Sabbath is to embrace God's alternative way.

To keep Sabbath is to recognize the rhythm of life. There is morning and there is night. There is a time to work and a time to rest. Sabbath creates a pause so that life is not one long, endless grind of labor until our last breath.

Within the context of our labor, we shabbat! We pause to rest and to live at a different pace; to notice and to celebrate.

To keep Sabbath is to recognize we are a part of community – a global community that extends into time. When we keep Sabbath, we are connected to those who've kept Sabbath before us and we also acknowledge those who will come after us.

To keep Sabbath is not formulaic nor rigid (we will get into the abuse of it the third week) it is a way of being. "God gives Sabbath rest as a gift of sheer grace." (Rachel Held Evans)

WEEK ONE. Sabbath Rest: An invitation to Rest as Receiving and Rejoicing

Opening: How do you like to rest?
 What do you find difficult about resting?

Before we look at any scripture that provides “commands” to remember and keep Sabbath, we begin at the beginning. In Genesis what do we learn directly from who God is as our Creator and who God says we are as those created in God’s image.

Read Genesis 2:1-4 in NRSV & The Message

(NRSV)

The heavens and the earth and all who live in them were completed. ²On the sixth day God completed all the work that he had done, and on the seventh day God rested from all the work that he had done. ³God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all the work of creation.⁴This is the account of the heavens and the earth when they were created.

(The Message)

Heaven and Earth were finished,
 down to the last detail.
²⁻⁴By the seventh day
 God had finished his work.
On the seventh day
 he rested from all his work.
God blessed the seventh day.
 He made it a Holy Day
Because on that day he rested from his work,
 all the creating God had done.
This is the story of how it all started,
 of Heaven and Earth when they were created.

Questions

1) How do you respond to the news that “God rested” when creation was complete?

How does this expand/change your perspective on God and your relationship with God?

2) What do you imagine this seventh day of rest to be like? What emotions, image, words come to mind? (allow these words to shape your growing view of Sabbath)

Quotes from fellow sojourners:

St. Augustine is famous for saying: “You arouse us so that praising you may bring us joy, **because you have made us and drawn us to yourself, and our heart is restless**

until it rests in you.”

Walter Brueggeman writes, “The reality of restlessness in our contemporary society is obvious and epidemic...the various elements of that restlessness of ‘not enough yet’ and ‘greater effort required’ are evident everywhere.”

Questions

- 3) Where do you feel restless?
- 4) What does it mean to rest in God when life is full of responsibilities, commitments, and seemingly endless tasks?
- 5) How does God provide rest? Where have you experienced God’s rest?

These words from Walter Brueggemann may help:

That divine rest (Genesis 2:1-4) on the seventh day of creation has made clear:

- (a) That YHWH is not a workaholic*
- (b) That YHWH is not anxious about the full-functioning of creation*
- (c) That the well-being of creation does not depend on endless work*

YHWH is a Sabbath-keeping God, which fact ensures that restfulness and not restlessness is at the center of life.

Read Matthew 11:28-30

NRSV

“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

The Message

“Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you’ll recover your life. I’ll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won’t lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you’ll learn to live freely and lightly.”

Questions

- 6) What are burdens right now that you find too heavy to carry alone – that wear you out and exhaust you?

7) How do you respond to Jesus' invitation about rest?

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SECONDARY READING

From Rachel Held Evans, *Wholehearted Faith*, (pg 171)

“What God’s love – and our belovedness – has to do with the Sabbath command might seem opaque. But in his book *Wrestling with Rest*, the practical theologian Nathan T. Stucky, citing Karl Barth, points out something I had never before noticed: Sabbath rest is not a reward that God gave humanity for a productive week. The very first Sabbath day was also humans’ very first full day of existence. In other words, they hadn’t done a thing. ‘That’s why human participation in Sabbath rest on the seventh day of creation couldn’t be based in human accomplishment. It could be grounded only in God’s work and invitation,’ Stucky writes. ‘The only work that humans have to reflect on at this point is God’s... From the beginning, then, God gives Sabbath rest as a gift of sheer grace.’

Sabbath rest was never meant to be our end. Instead, it was and is our beginning, infused with God’s steadfast love as expressed through God’s grace of time to enjoy and soak in God’s creativity.”

Questions

8) What is the significance that God gives rest before humans have “done a thing”?

9) What is a way you can “cease from work” to receive God’s rest and to rejoice in who God is this week?

End in prayer for one another

WEEK TWO. Sabbath Rest: Invitation to Remember

Opening: What is one way you paused this last week?

What did you notice?

Some quotes from fellow sojourners:

“Sabbath is the celebration of life beyond and outside productivity. Sabbath is not simply the pause that refreshes. It is the pause that transforms.” Walter Brueggemann

“A great benefit of Sabbath keeping is that we learn to let God take care of us — not by becoming passive and lazy, but in the freedom of giving up our feeble attempts to be God in our own lives.” Marva Dawn

Read Exodus 20:1-2, 8-11 & Deuteronomy 5:12-15 (NRSV)

Then God spoke all these words:

7 I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

8 **Remember** the Sabbath day and treat it as holy. 9 Six days you may work and do all your tasks, 10 but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. Do not do any work on it—not you, your sons or daughters, your male or female servants, your animals, or the immigrant who is living with you. 11 Because the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and everything that is in them in six days, but rested on the seventh day. That is why the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

(Deut. 5) Keep the Sabbath day and treat it as holy, exactly as the Lord your God commanded: 13 Six days you may work and do all your tasks, 14 but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. Don’t do any work on it—not you, your sons or daughters, your male or female servants, your oxen or donkeys or any of your animals, or the immigrant who is living among you—so that your male and female servants can rest just like you. 15 **Remember** that you were a slave in Egypt, but the Lord your God brought you out of there with a strong hand and an outstretched arm. That’s why the Lord your God commands you to keep the Sabbath day

Question

1) Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5 share similarities but also provide different reasons for **remembering** the Sabbath. What are these similarities and differences and why are both important in our relationship with God?

***Those who had been enslaved in Egypt would have memories of trauma:** days upon days of endless oppression as Exodus 1 describes: “the Egyptians enslaved the Israelites. They made their lives miserable with hard labor, making mortar and bricks, doing field work, and by forcing them to do all kinds of other cruel work....”*

Questions

2) Imagine what the Israelite people experienced in Egypt. What impact might those memories hold?

- 3) How does “remembering Sabbath” bring healing and transformation to lives controlled by endless production and other people’s agendas?
- 4) What are ways that the productivity mindset of our culture binds? How does remembering the Sabbath free us to see ourselves differently? *How does pausing from work bring healing to traumatic memories?*

Read Matthew 6:25-34

“Therefore, I say to you, don’t worry about your life, what you’ll eat or what you’ll drink, or about your body, what you’ll wear. Isn’t life more than food and the body more than clothes? Look at the birds in the sky. They don’t sow seed or harvest grain or gather crops into barns. Yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Aren’t you worth much more than they are? Who among you by worrying can add a single moment to your life? And why do you worry about clothes? Notice how the lilies in the field grow. They don’t wear themselves out with work, and they don’t spin cloth. But I say to you that even Solomon in all of his splendor wasn’t dressed like one of these. If God dresses grass in the field so beautifully, even though it’s alive today and tomorrow it’s thrown into the furnace, won’t God do much more for you, you people of weak faith? Therefore, don’t worry and say, ‘What are we going to eat?’ or ‘What are we going to drink?’ or ‘What are we going to wear?’ Gentiles long for all these things. Your heavenly Father knows that you need them. Instead, desire first and foremost God’s kingdom and God’s righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore, stop worrying about tomorrow, because tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.

Questions

- 5) Be honest. What is your gut response to Jesus’ words in Matthew 6? What do you love and what feels challenging and near impossible?
- 6) What is a “worry” in your life that we can hold with you? How does letting go of worry connect with remembering Sabbath?
- 7) What is a practice that you could begin this week that enables you to let go of worry and remember God delights in who you are (not measuring you by your productivity)?

Take that time when you might do a task and take a walk with God or sit with God and give thanks for what you love in your life.

Quote by Wayne Mueller to inspire your practices:

“If we are to deeply and fully integrate rest into the rhythm of our lives, we need a sense memory, a visceral bodily experience of what it feels like to be delightfully inactive....”

Walk leisurely, don't drive; walk in the garden, don't answer the phone, turn off the television and the radio. Forget the CD and the computer. Quiet the insidious technology, and remember that we live in bodies that, through a feast of the senses, appreciate the beauty of the world.

Walk under the stars and moon. Knock on the door, don't ring. Sing at the table. Eat, drink, touch, smell, and remember who you are. Taking in the beauty of God's world through the five senses can help us grow in thankfulness, both for the world God made but also for who he made us to be: his children, his friends, his delightful creation, his loved ones redeemed from slavery through Jesus Christ.

Some people enjoy caring for God's creation on the sabbath. This might involve walking instead of driving, or gardening organically. Riding a bike or walking to church not only reduces our impact on the creation but also helps us slow down and enjoy the beauty of the world in community with others. Some people choose to prepare a festive sabbath meal using all organic food in order to rejoice, for one day anyway, in treading lightly on the earth." Wayne Mueller

8) We need cues to help us remember Sabbath -- like a string around a finger, a post-it, an alarm on our phone or buddy to remind us. What reminder can you put in place to help you? Start small and attach your new practice to something that is already a habit or a routine.

Sabbath keeping is to be part of the rhythm of life - woven into the fabric of your week, month, year. Sabbath may not fall on Sunday for you; you may not be able to take a full day. It is a gift God gives you to live life differently than the demands of the world place upon you. Sabbath challenges us to ask where our identity is based.

Sabbath Questions for this week:

- Where can you pause to lift your heart, soul, and mind away from the mundane, ever-dominating daily demands and toward your Creator?
- Is it possible to set aside a time from sundown to sundown (or a portion of that time) to live in a "ceasing from the rest of the week" way?
- How does remembering who God is and who we are made in God's image (God's created ones) make this possible?

Week Three: Sabbath Rest: Invitation to Resistance

A quote from Rabbi Heschel (please read with changing "man" to "human" and changing pronouns if more helpful)

"He who wants to enter the holiness of the day must first lay down the profanity of clattering commerce, of being yoked to toil . . . He must say farewell to manual work and learn to understand that the world has already been created and will survive without the help of man. Six days a week we wrestle with the world, wringing profit from the earth; on the Sabbath we especially care for the seed of eternity planted in the soul. The world has our hands, but our soul belongs to Someone Else."

- Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath*

Opening Questions: Connection to last week (and with no guilt attached!):

- What have you learned from any Sabbath practices? How have they enabled you to let go of worry and remember God delights in who you are (not measuring you by your productivity)?
- How does being aware of Sabbath-keeping change your perspective on time? On productivity? On relationships?
- In this past week, where have you experienced God at work in our world (not you at work – God at work?)

Scripture

Read Isaiah 58. (NIV)

³‘Why have we fasted,’ they say,
‘and you have not seen it?
Why have we humble ourselves,
and you have not noticed?’
“Yet on the day of your fasting, you do
as you please
and exploit all your workers.
⁴Your fasting ends in quarreling and
strife,
and in striking each other with
wicked fists.
You cannot fast as you do today
and expect your voice to be heard on
high.
⁵Is this the kind of fast I have chosen,
only a day for people to humble
themselves?
Is it only for bowing one’s head like a
reed
and for lying in sackcloth and ashes?
Is that what you call a fast,
a day acceptable to the Lord?
⁶“Is not this the kind of fasting I have
chosen:
to loose the chains of injustice
and untie the cords of the yoke,
to set the oppressed free
and break every yoke?
⁷Is it not to share your food with the
hungry
and to provide the poor wanderer

with shelter—
when you see the naked, to clothe
them,
and not to turn away from your own
flesh and blood?
⁸Then your light will break forth like the
dawn,
and your healing will quickly appear;
then your righteousness will go before
you,
and the glory of the Lord will be your
rear guard.
⁹Then you will call, and the Lord will
answer;
you will cry for help, and he will say:
Here am I.
“If you do away with the yoke of
oppression,
with the pointing finger and
malicious talk,
¹⁰and if you spend yourselves on behalf
of the hungry
and satisfy the needs of the
oppressed,
then your light will rise in the darkness,
and your night will become like
noonday.
¹¹The Lord will guide you always;
he will satisfy your needs in a sun-
scorched land
and will strengthen your frame.
You will be like a well-watered garden,
like a spring whose waters never fail.
¹²Your people will rebuild the ancient
ruins

and will raise up the age-old foundations;
you will be called Repairer of Broken Walls,
Restorer of Streets with Dwellings.
¹³“If you keep your feet from breaking the Sabbath
and from doing as you please on my holy day,
if you call the Sabbath a delight
and the Lord’s holy day honorable,

and if you honor it by not going your own way
and not doing as you please or speaking idle words,
¹⁴then you will find your joy in the Lord,
and I will cause you to ride in triumph on the heights of the land
and to feast on the inheritance of your father Jacob.”
For the mouth of the Lord has spoken.

Questions

- 1) What abuses of Sabbath-keeping had emerged into Israelite culture?
What had the people forgotten?
- 2) What is the radical invitation in this passage?
What are we to resist?
- 3) How does keeping Sabbath connect with living life aware of others?
How does Sabbath keeping resist cultural pressures and embrace joy and wholeness?
- 4) Next time we will talk more about Jesus’ approach to Sabbath. In preparation, read John 10:10. How does focusing on Jesus as the Lord of the Sabbath bring abundant life to you?

“The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”

Practices

- 7) How will you expand your Sabbath practices this week based on what you’ve learned?

To end our time, we want to practice a breath prayer.

In Exodus 31:17 we read, “. . . In six days the Lord made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day God rested, and was refreshed.” The word for God’s resting is literally “to catch one’s breath.”

Exodus 31 says on the 7th day God was refreshed—“Vaiynafesh,” meaning God exhaled.

The word **nephesh** in Hebrew is a very important word. It can be life, self, soul, living, being, person, appetite, emotion, desire and passion. When people were created, God breathed into the nostrils and made the **nephesh** (being) alive. God created life by

breathing into us—the resurrected Christ breathed on the disciples and gave them the Holy Spirit, creating new life. **We may not only catch our breath, but we may also catch the holy breath of God who gave us life.** (It is a Jewish tradition of taking a breath between rested and refreshed when reading Exodus 31:17).

Take time to breathe in deeply and hold that breath. Allow yourself to feel God’s Spirit in you, refreshing you. As you slowly exhale, give thanks for the refreshment that God brings to your soul.

Do this three times. Then say together, **“God rested,”** (*pause, deeply inhale and exhale*) then say, **“and was refreshed.”**

Closing: Take time to pray for one another.

Week Four: Sabbath Rest: Invitation to Restoration

“Sabbath-keeping requires two orientations. **One is Godward. The other is timeward.** To keep Sabbath well—as both a day and an attitude—we have to think clearly about God and freshly about time. We likely, at some level, need to change our minds about both. Unless we trust God’s sovereignty, we won’t dare risk Sabbath. And unless we receive time as abundance and gift, not as ration and burden, we’ll never develop a capacity to savor Sabbath.”

— Mark Buchanan, [The Rest of God: Restoring Your Soul by Restoring Sabbath](#)

1. What are you learning on your journey of embracing the gift and FREEDOM of Sabbath Rest?

“Like a path through the forest, Sabbath creates a marker for ourselves so if we are lost, we can find our way back to our center.” – Wayne Muller, *Sabbath: Restoring the Sacred Rhythm of Rest*

2. How has your attentiveness to Sabbath and your recent practices help you find your “way back to (your) center”?

How has this been restorative?

Scripture Reading

Our first passage from Mark 2, reveals a lot about Jesus' approach and attitude toward Sabbath. The next two are about healing on the Sabbath. There are at least 7 times Jesus heals someone on the Sabbath. What do you notice about Jesus and those who are in the story with him?

Mark 2

²³ One Sabbath he was going through the grain fields, and as they made their way his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. ²⁴ The Pharisees said to him, “Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?”

²⁵ And he said to them, “Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need of food, ²⁶ how he entered the house of God when Abiathar was high priest and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and he gave some to his companions?”

²⁷ Then he said to them, “The Sabbath was made for humankind and not humankind for the Sabbath, ²⁸ so the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath.”

Mark 3

Again Jesus entered the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand. ² They were watching him to see whether he would cure him on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse him.

³ And Jesus said to the man who had the withered hand, “Come forward.”

⁴ Then he said to them, “Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to kill?”

But they were silent.

⁵ He looked around at them with anger; he was grieved at their hardness of heart and said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” He stretched it out, and his hand was restored.

⁶ The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him on how to destroy him.

Luke 13:10-16

Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath. And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight.

When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, “Woman, you are set free from your ailment.” When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God.

But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the Sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, “There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured and not on the Sabbath day.”

But the Lord answered him and said, “You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger and lead it to water? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from

this bondage on the Sabbath day?" When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame, and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things being done by him.

Questions

- 3) What do we discover about the heart of Sabbath from Jesus?
Dialogue on these passages and other gospel passages where Jesus brings Healing and restoration on the Sabbath. **What matters to Jesus, Lord of the Sabbath?**
- 4) What did the religious leaders miss about the heart of Sabbath (rest)? What seems to motivate them?
- 5) **Focus on the woman in Luke 10.** What does her story reveal about the heart of Sabbath being about restoration?
- 6) In our heartbrokenness about the suffering in our world (far and near), it is tempting to NOT keep Sabbath. **How does Sabbath-keeping involve living in solidarity with one another** (like the man whose hand was "withered" and the woman who was bent over?)

Jubilee" means a year of rest, a time to rest from labor, a time for grace, and a time to celebrate freedom set forth by God. It is also called the "year of the Lord's favor" in scripture. It is the Sabbath of Sabbaths when the land is given rest on the 50th year and debts are to be forgiven. A new day of restoration! (Leviticus 25 explains)

In Luke 4, Jesus quotes Isaiah 61 to describe himself as the fulfillment of Jubilee (the Lord's favor). Jesus, Lord of the Sabbath, is at the heart of God's restoration.

18 "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to set free those who are oppressed,

19 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

20 And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. 21 Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

You may feel small and insignificant in your attempts to remember Sabbath and receive the freedom of Sabbath rest.

7) How does your perspective change as you recognize that **you are a part of the larger restoration God desires to bring to all of creation** -- through embracing Sabbath Rest?

How does your embrace of Sabbath connect you more to the places of suffering and connect you to Jesus, our Liberator?

8) Where have you recently experienced Jesus' healing presence?

9) What is a place in your life that you are praying for restoration?

You may want to read the quote about JR Tolkien's imagination of Sabbath.

"J. R. R. Tolkien gives one of the most entrancing descriptions of the true nature of Sabbath. In book 1 of The Lord of the Rings trilogy, he describes a time of rest and healing in the house of Elrond in Rivendell. The hobbits, along with Strider, their guide, have made a dangerous, almost fatal journey to this place. They will soon have to make an even more dangerous, almost certainly fatal journey away from this place. But in the meantime, this:

'For awhile the hobbits continued to talk and think of the past journey and of the perils that lay ahead; but such was the virtue of the land of Rivendell that soon all fear and anxiety was lifted from their minds. The future, good or ill, was not forgotten, but ceased to have power over the present. Health and hope grew strong in them, and they were content with each day as it came, taking pleasure in every meal, and in every word and song.'

The future, good or ill, was not forgotten, but ceased to have power over the present. That's Sabbath." — **Mark Buchanan, The Rest of God: Restoring Your Soul by Restoring Sabbath**

Pray for one another.