

¹ Therefore, since the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it. ² For we also have had the good news proclaimed to us, just as they did; but the message they heard was of no value to them, because they did not share the faith of those who obeyed. ³ Now we who have believed enter that rest, just as God has said,

“So I declared on oath in my anger,
‘They shall never enter my rest.’”

And yet his works have been finished since the creation of the world. ⁴ For somewhere he has spoken about the seventh day in these words: “On the seventh day God rested from all his works.” ⁵ And again in the passage above he says, “They shall never enter my rest.”

⁶ Therefore since it still remains for some to enter that rest, and since those who formerly had the good news proclaimed to them did not go in because of their disobedience, ⁷ God again set a certain day, calling it “Today.” This he did when a long time later he spoke through David, as in the passage already quoted:

“Today, if you hear his voice,
do not harden your hearts.”

⁸ For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken later about another day. ⁹ There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; ¹⁰ for anyone who enters God’s rest also rests from their works, just as God did from his. ¹¹ Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will perish by following their example of disobedience.

-- Heb 4:1-11

Today is Sunday, the first day of the week, the Sabbath Day.

Every Sunday, we throw back the covers and stumble to the bathroom for a shower in hopes that we might be awake enough to listen to the same old preacher pound out the same old tune. Or, we might awaken to the noise of little feet, or a “*mommy*” floating down the hallway in a small voice. In some places, you’re expected to put on what’s now quaintly known as your Sunday Best—which means more than just your nice clothes. It also means your sunshine smiley face, your happy-clappy self, your “*everything is good in my perfect life*” mask that you wear for a few hours before lunch.

You do your best to sing, to listen, to engage with the people you meet. Sometimes you get something out of that same old tune from that same old preacher. Afterward, you might meet some

friendly people who wish you well. Then, you go to lunch—with family, with friends, by yourself—and that's it. That's the Sunday experience. That's what's become of the Sabbath.

We all think we know what it means to take a Sabbath. You may have heard that the word “Sabbath” is from the Hebrew word “Shabat”, which means “ceasing, stopping, resting.” The first mention of this kind of rest is in Genesis when God apparently “rests” after creating.¹

Now, the first question that should come to mind is what kind of God we've got if he needs to rest after a pretty packed six days of nonstop creating? Does God get tired? Is he really that limited? Granted, the universe (and the stuff beyond it) is a pretty big place and he probably has a right to be tired after making it, but does simply saying God “rests” from his labours mean that he kicks back with a beer on the patio?

There's a strand of philosophy called “Deism” that might be important for you to know. A Deist is someone who believes that God made everything, sure, but then removed himself from it. Occasionally, the Deist God might fumble for his pointed stick to change channels on his closed-circuit TV (through which he watches humans), but ultimately, this Deist God doesn't get involved. He's the divine watchmaker, the God who put together a precision instrument called Creation and then let it go.

We stray perilously close to thinking of God in a Deist way when we say that God goes all couch potato on the seventh day and then never gets up to *keep on creating*. Fact is, God is *not* sitting around in his underwear and snoring into his Doritos—he's alive, active, and *still* making more. The universe is expanding. Stars are being born. Energy turns into matter and matter into energy. God is still creating.

¹ Gen 2:2

So if God is still fashioning and forging with all the spontaneous energy of a three year-old with fingerpaints, just what is going on when Genesis records him as “taking a rest?” What kind of “rest” does an infinitely energetic² God need? More to the point, what kind of “rest” do we need the most?

Hebrews 4 talks about the difference in the kinds of rest that God takes and the kind that we, not-Gods, need to make every effort to enter into. It sounds counterintuitive to exert yourself to rest, yet it does require effort to take off our ersatz godhood and allow ourselves to be no more than children who are held in the strong embrace of God.

For one, our restlessly active God doesn't flop into bed exhausted after a long six days of creating. The Sabbath that God takes, and part of what we in turn take, is a moment in time where there is no working to be done in order to appreciate what *has* been done. God's rest on the seventh day wasn't because he was tired, but because the final act of creation is appreciation. I'm often corrected for saying that Creation happened in seven days instead of six, but I don't think I'm all that wrong. The seventh day of rest is as much a part of Creation as the first six. God's *shabat* is a holy pause wherein he says “this is *good*” over what he has made.

This is part of what we're invited into when we speak of entering God's rest. We *are* to take regular stops from work to appreciate what God has made. Yet there is a vital difference between the rest we enter into. It's not an appreciation day for what we're doing, Sabbath is for appreciating *God*—dwelling within us, within our world, and within Creation as a whole. We attend to God in a special way as we cease from work and marvel at everything he has done and is doing. The Sabbath-rest of the people of God that the author of Hebrews exhorts us to enter into is one of recentering, refreshing and reforming.

² Psalm 121:4

Sabbath is recentering because our ceasing is a reminder that we are not our own gods and that we do not worship ourselves. We stop from work not only because we trust God to make up the difference, but because for a time, we stop acting as though everything in our lives depends on our action alone. Many of us here live with the conceit that Sabbath is the throwaway day that we dutifully offer God like tossing a dog some table scraps. Yet the first action of taking regular Sabbath is to take us out of our conceit and put us back in our place as God's creatures who have *limits* and therefore need to respect them. The ultimate purpose of Sabbath is for us to enjoy God more fully and to intentionally focus our hearts and minds on him as practice for the full Sabbath that awaits us on the other side of death. This isn't to say that our next lives will be one long Sunday service—God forbid! But when you and I open our eyes anew in the fulfilled Kingdom of God, we will at last be radically *recentered* because the true meaning of Sabbath is to rest in our bond with the Triune God. This bond in this life is tenuously felt at best, but in the next, our connection, our intimate relationship with God will be as steady as the breath in our lungs or the beating of our hearts.

Sabbath is refreshing because the recentering we experience relieves us of the pressure to be our own provider Gods. Here in North America it's easy to fall prey to the idea that we make things go, that we are the ones who control our lives and our destinies. We live padded lives, and we do our best to insulate ourselves away from all sources of grief and harm. However, this insulation also tends to mean that we forget the source of all that lives and breathes and begin to think that everything depends on us and our action. But by the radical practice of rest, we declare that we are not responsible to make our lives go. Sure it sounds scary, but the faith we practice by resting is meant to relieve us of the burden of being our own gods.

Living by our own resources, our own savings, and our own cleverness only goes so far. We know we're limited, but most of us live frenetically within our limits, speeding from one destination to

the next, hurrying between work and errands until we collapse, pulled apart and emptied of life. Yet this pace of life isn't the only factor that contributes to our disintegration. The very nature of our work itself disembodies us and makes us more like ghosts in the machine than whole human beings.

Sabbath-rest requires that we recognize our limitations and honour our createdness—the fact that we are not gods. We think of refreshment solely as something that a soft drink provides, but refreshment is more than just a Coke and a smile. The Greek word for “Sabbath”³ can be linked to an agricultural term used for when the soil is allowed to rest and replenish its nutrients. Not so that it can enjoy this rest for its own ends, but so that the soil can bear further fruit. You and I aren't much different from the dust from which we're made—we too require a time of replenishment in order to bear fruit. Where we differ from the rest of Creation is that we not only require physical rest, but spiritual rest as well. What I mean is that being human means requiring more than just a moment to catch your breath or take a nap—though these can be spiritual acts as well. Being human means we are somehow made in the image of God and therefore require a rest that reminds us that we are not just animals, but sons and daughters who are sustained by the living God.

Sabbath is also a time of reforming. The strange act of Christian worship occurs on the first day of every week because this commemorates the resurrection of Jesus, the re-forming of his life from death. Whenever we gather together, we gather around the *happenedness* of Jesus' death and resurrection,. Then, we carry this remembrance with us for the rest of the week until we come together once more and re-remember all over again. This isn't because we're so forgetful that we need to be reminded of Jesus' sacrifice. This is because the rhythm of God's rest held out for us in Jesus is now the rhythm that dictates our lives. The resurrection is a happening so disruptive of the world's march to death that time itself orients around it.

³ Gr: “anapausis”

The world we live in runs a different rhythm, the one known in recent times as “24/7.” With the advent of electric lights and global communication networks, the division between night and day grows blurry, and soon work is no longer bounded by the hours of light we are granted, but by our will to grind out our existence. In our hubris we think we can keep it up—as long as there is sufficient Red Bull and coffee—yet the only things that can do this are machines. It almost goes without saying that you and I are not machines—so why do we think we can live like one?

Sabbath re-forms our lives because for a time, we stop. As Christians, we do an odd thing when we stop: we stop and worship the one from whom all living and being flow. This is where most of us get Sabbath-rest wrong. We think weekends (Sundays included) are only meant to be gasps of air in the water-treading act of life in the modern world, but true Sabbath is much more. For without paying attention to our connection with God, indeed, our very *dependence* on him, we lose ourselves and live according to the illusion that we are self-sustaining perpetual motion machines. What it means, then, to make every effort to enter into God’s rest is to allow ourselves to be rested *by* God, to hold his hand as he leads us beside quiet waters and to lie down in green fields.

It isn’t easy to stop, because stopping not only requires that we trust God, but also that we trust that we aren’t God. Yet this is the basis of the rest that God offers us not just now, but for our full rest to come in eternity. For then, all our halting faith in God in this life will be transformed into continual trust. We will awake in the light of Christ, we will sleep in the light of Christ. Heaven will be a perpetual Sabbath, an eternal rest, where we finally learn to live in God alone.

- 1.) What do you do for your Sabbath?
- 2.) What things recenter, refresh, and re-form you?