

Spirit in the Form of Time

Part 1: A History

Reading: 'X' by Wendell Berry

In seminary, to my great surprise, one of my favorite subjects was Old Testament. I took classes beyond what was required because I liked it so much. The stories and the stories behind the stories fascinate me. The ways the text echoes across generations and is interpreted and reinterpreted in different communities fascinate me. The nuances of translation fascinate me... And, because Jewish and Christian scriptures are only one of the many sources of wisdom that we honor in this congregation, I don't focus on this stuff much. Today, I hope you'll let me indulge in a bit of Bible nerdiness.

The texts that became the Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, were formed across centuries in different communities of Israelites before being written down and then compiled into the single book that we know today. There are places in the text where you can see evidence of this later stitching together, where stories are repeated in slightly different ways, sometimes contradicting themselves. One of the most interesting ones is right at the beginning. There are two different stories about the creation of humanity. In the first, God creates humanity all at once, men and women together. Then, just a few verses later, we have the second story. This is the one most of us know best – first the creation of Adam, the man, then the creation of Eve, the woman. The different stories come from different communities with different views about the origins of humanity.

There are also two versions of the Ten Commandments, one in the Book of Exodus and one in Deuteronomy. They are mostly the same, with slight differences between them, again reflecting what mattered to the communities that created them. Today, our focus is on the practice of Sabbath, finding spirit in the form of time, setting aside the seventh day for rest. Today, I want to highlight the text of the commandment to keep the Sabbath, because the reasons to keep the Sabbath vary between the two versions. Here is the version from Exodus: 'Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident of your towns. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested on the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and consecrated it.' (Exod. 20:8-11, NRSV)

Here's the Deuteronomy:

'Observe the Sabbath day and keep it holy, as the Lord your God commanded you. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, or your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock, or the resident alien in your towns, so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you. Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day.' (Deut. 5:12-15)

Those are two different reasons to observe a Sabbath. The first calls on people to remember the creation story and that after six days of work, the divine rested. That practice of work followed by rest is held up as a holy example. And that rest, that refreshment that the divine experienced on that seventh day is more

than can be expressed in our word refreshment. The Hebrew doesn't translate well. The root word is not fresh, but a word that means soul, self, and life. On that day, the holy was re-souled, re-selfed, re-lived.¹ And the people of Israel are commanded to practice this same re-souling, re-selfing, re-living. It is about rest, but also about restoring ourselves, reconnecting to who we are most fundamentally.

As you heard, the second version of the Sabbath commandment has an entirely different reason for the practice. People must observe the Sabbath because their ancestors were slaves in Egypt. The people of Israel, whether they can trace lineage from those slaves or not, are instructed to remember that story of slavery and rest on the seventh day and have every living being in their community rest too. Sabbath is in part a way to celebrate freedom and the agency that the people now have. As slaves, they were not allowed rest; now, as a free people, they can rest; they must rest. And they must invite every person and animal in their community into that Sabbath rest as well.

The Sabbath practice is deeply tied to economic concerns. Giving up one day of work was a sacrifice for the ancient Israelites. The weekend hadn't been invented yet. When the Romans first came into contact with observant Jews, they thought they were lazy for taking the one day off every week.² Nevertheless, the Jews persisted with their Sabbath. They knew rest was necessary, despite the economic sacrifice it required. Not working reminded them that they are not what they do. We all need time off to re-soul, re-self, re-life.

And keeping the Sabbath is just the beginning of a whole set of instructions on economic practices in the Hebrew Bible, a reordering of the role of money and wealth in our lives deeply rooted in the rhythm of seven, the rhythm of Sabbath-keeping. Every seven years, debts were to be forgiven. Every seven years, slaves were to be given freedom and enough resources to succeed as free people. Every seven years, land was to lie fallow and whatever grew was to be given to the poor. Every 49 years, that is every seven times seven years, property was to be returned to its original owner. The text lays out a way of being that privileges people over profits, neighborliness over wealth, and sees all beings—even slaves, immigrants and working animals—as deserving of respect, not simply tools for converting time into space. There is historical evidence that some of these rules were followed some of the time in ancient Israel.³

These ancient laws describe a just economic order. The Sabbath practice at the heart of these laws is a chance to create a more just world. Walter Brueggeman, a leading Christian Old Testament scholar writes of Sabbath practice, 'The performance of Sabbath is an act of testimony, a power antidote to... a dehumanizing system of power. Practically, Sabbath is an insistence of rest for even the most vulnerable among us. Theologically, it is an insistence that the world does not belong to the predators... Sabbath keeping is a deep affirmation that all God's creatures, human and non-human, should be honored in concrete and practical ways... Sabbath is an embrace of the truth of the abundance of creation against the anxious scarcity that reduces neighbor to threat. Sabbath is a regular, visible enactment of that alternative.'⁴

¹ Brueggemann, Walter. 'Sabbath as Alternative.' *Word & World*. Vol 36, No 3 (Summer 2016), pages 247-256. Page 249

² Heschel, Abraham Joshua. *The Sabbath*. New York: Noonday Press, 1979. Page 13

³ Jacobson, Rolf A. 'Oppression Interrupted: The Sabbath and Justice.' *Word & World*. Vol 36, No 3 (Summer 2016), pages 219-227. Page 226

⁴ Brueggeman, 256

Sabbath is a chance to create a more just world. And I invite you to sit with this vision as we listen to some beautiful music.

Part 2: Keeping Our Sabbaths

Readings: 'Thinking' by Danusha Laméris

In many ways, we humans are machines that convert time into space. When we travel by foot, by bike, by car, we convert our time into relocation through space. When we work for pay, we convert our time into a paycheck – and then usually convert pieces of that paycheck into the rent or mortgage payments that allow us space to live. Other parts of the paycheck allow us to purchase the objects that then fill that space.

Abraham Joshua Heschel was one of the leading Rabbis of the last century, famous for his scholarship and his activism. He literally wrote the book on Sabbath. He writes,

'Technical civilization is man's conquest of space. It is a triumph frequently achieved by sacrificing an essential ingredient of existence, namely, time. In technical civilization, we expend time to gain space. To enhance our power in the world of space is our main objective. Yet to have more does not mean to be more. The power we attain in the world of space terminates abruptly at the borderline of time. But time is the heart of existence...

The danger begins when in gaining power in the realm of space, we forfeit all aspirations in the realm of time. There is a realm of time where the goal is not to have but to be, not to own but to give, not to control but to share, not to subdue but to be in accord.'⁵

One of the great teachings of the Jewish tradition is to remember the realm of time alongside the realm of space. Heschel says, speaking for the Jewish people, "the Sabbaths are our great cathedrals." That is a powerful idea. I know many of us have been in holy places, houses of worship or places of natural splendor that stun us with their beauty. What would it mean to have a day, one day out of seven stun us similarly with its beauty?

The Jewish tradition has detailed and varied instructions on how to build this cathedral in time. The ancient rabbis who wrote the Talmud, a set of commentaries on the Bible and then commentaries on those commentaries that in its fullness stretches to over 6,000 pages, named 39 categories of work that cannot be done on the Sabbath.⁶ Differing schools of thought have brought different interpretations to the question of whether driving a car, flipping a light switch, or holding an umbrella or dozens of other tasks is work or not. In Israel, some elevators in residential skyscrapers are set on the Sabbath to automatically go up and down all day opening on every floor to save people from the work of pushing a button.

There are a lot of nos in Sabbath-keeping; those nos make room for a deeper, more important yes. The yes of building a cathedral in time. There is a big and beautiful tradition of welcoming the Sabbath every Friday

⁵ Heschel, 3

⁶ Soria, Karen. 'A Jewish View of Shabbat: An Envidable Practice for Our Time.' *Vision*. Spring 2015. Pages 44-49. Page 45

evening with food and drink and ritual. The Jewish tradition is full of descriptions of welcoming the Sabbath as though the Sabbath is a queen or a bride. It is holy and beautiful.

One of the challenges and joys of our Unitarian Universalist tradition is that we are not handed an authoritative text brimming with arguments about what it means to be faithful. We do not have 6,000 pages of ancient wisdom to reinterpret for today. If we want to build a cathedral in time, engage spirit in the form of time, or find ways to re-soul, re-self, re-life ourselves, we do not have a rich ritual tradition to step into. It is inappropriate for those of us who do not have roots in the Jewish tradition to adopt their Sabbath practices and yet we can find ways to honor spirit in the form of time.

This challenge for each of us to forge our own meaningful path is also a source of joy and wisdom. Each of us can develop the practices that serve us well. How you might build a cathedral in time? How you might re-soul, re-self, re-life?

Those of you who get emails from me might have noticed a note below my email signature that says I do not check email on Mondays, as that is my Sabbath. That is the day that works for me to build my structure in time. I can't say I've built a cathedral in time, exactly. My Sabbath practice is more like a small shed; it's cozy and I need that weekly visit, but it's not something tourists will line up for. I don't check emails on Mondays. Only in rare circumstances do I work on Mondays. I don't check Facebook and limit my internet time and news intake on Mondays. That last piece is hardest for me. I struggle to put down my smartphone. The average person with a smartphone checks it about 85 times a day.⁷ That's mind-boggling to me – and I can completely relate to it.

And saying all these nos – to email, to work, to facebook, to my phone, to the news—has opened up time for a deeper yes. In my cozy shed of time, I have the time to re-soul, re-self, re-life. I don't do anything particularly profound. My practices wouldn't be approved by the ancient rabbis. I grocery shop. I usually do an elaborate cooking project of some kind, which is a source of joy and comfort to me and my family. I take walks. I let my thoughts wander. Often, that's when my best ideas emerge. More importantly than anything I do, I am reminded that the world keeps spinning. I am reminded I am not the center of the universe. Great work happens while I'm not paying attention. I remember the love we are wrapped in will not let us go.

What kind of structure could you build in time? A cathedral? a cozy shed? What are the nos that you can say that will allow you to say yes to something more meaningful?

May we all find ways to build our structures in time.

May we re-soul, re-self, re-life ourselves.

May we make it so.

Amen.

⁷ Cytron, Barry. 'Observing Shabbat.' *Word & World*. Vol 36, No 3 (Summer 2016), 257-266. Pages 265