

# **Voices: Practicing Sabbath during difficult times**

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We are living in a changed and changing world. Each day, and sometimes each hour, brings announcements of changes to our daily pattern of living almost unthinkable just a week ago.

A global pandemic places heavy responsibility on some and creates increased workload for many. If you work in IT for a school district or stock shelves at a grocery store, it is likely your workload and responsibility are increasing.

But, as schools and restaurants close, workplaces institute telework policies, churches cancel programs and the frenetic pace of our world painfully and with grinding groans of protest downshifts, the COVID-19 pandemic is forcing a slowdown for most in our society.

## **The mixed bag of a societal slowdown**

A pandemic-enforced, society-wide slowdown is a mixed blessing. My family walked our dog last night, and more families than ever were on walks and bike rides yesterday evening. Families are having dinner together and playing board games. Acts of kindness and generosity toward neighbors and at-risk populations abound. Opportunities for witnessing to God's kingdom abound.

At the same time, elderly friends and family members are quarantined in residential living facilities and can receive no visitors. Crippling financial hardships loom on the horizon for many families. Anxiety about infection is real for many of our neighbors.

With a mixed bag of hope and anxiety, we have been forced into a season resembling Sabbath.

## **What Sabbath is meant to be**

Sabbath is a concept foreign to a culture in which busyness is a virtue. Most associate Sabbath with a dour day of abstention replete with memories of being forced to take unwanted naps on Sunday afternoons.

Puritanical Sabbath associations are misappropriations of Sabbath's biblical witness. Sabbath is a radical day in the life of God's people where they work and participate in the most joyful activities God provides in creation. Sabbath is a day for feasting not fasting.

In his book, *Sabbath*, Dan Allender writes, "Sabbath is the holy time where we feast, play, dance, have sex, sing, pray, laugh, tell stories, read, paint, walk, and watch creation in its fullness."

Sabbath affords time to read God's word and pray, to invite neighbors to dinner instead of eating in front of the TV, to read a book instead of checking email.

Sabbath is a day of delight.

## **Sabbath during difficult times**

But the season of COVID-19 does not feel like a season of delight. Although we have been forced to slow down and are invited to Sabbath, we are all-too-aware of the pain, anxiety and loss all around us.

Although it is a day of delight, Sabbath does not ignore the darkness in the world and in our lives. Biblical witness suggests Sabbath flourishes most when circumstances are most difficult. Though there are limited mentions

of Sabbath under David, Solomon or the rest of the kings, Sabbath abounds in the two most difficult periods of the Old Testament story.

In the wilderness, when God's people were placeless for a generation, God granted them a double portion of manna and quail every seventh day so they might not work but rest in God's presence. They were to tell stories to a younger generation about God's history with his people and were to worship together. Sabbath becomes a commandment in the wilderness.

In Exile, when God's people seemingly lost God's promise of a king, land and temple, they rediscovered in Sabbath what Abraham Joshua Heschel describes as a "temple in time." On the seventh day, Israelites ceased working for Babylon, gathered together, broke bread, told stories of God's salvation history with his people, and dreamed new dreams of what it meant to be God's people.

In their darkest hours, the people of God found joy in and through Sabbath. Joy and delight are found not by ignoring darkness around and within us, but by bringing all of it before God and trusting him with our joy and sorrow, delight and anxiety.

## **Opportunity for Sabbath**

On Sabbath, we are reminded God is God, and we are not. We receive the offer freshly each week to choose whether we will trust in and follow the God who beckons us to rest in him.

We and all of our neighbors are grappling with life in a changed and changing world. We are holding onto anxiety, fear and loss.

We also are being offered the opportunity to slow down. Instead of holding on tightly to all that threatens to overwhelm, might we use this time to bring all we feel and think before God and trust him? Might we use this

time to count blessings, gather—virtually or in groups less than 10—with friends for prayer and encouragement? Might we cook dinner for neighbors and look to the needs of those marginalized and facing loss?

By slowing down and experiencing Sabbath, might we find joy in the midst of darkness?

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