

God's Rest

Alison Kershaw, St Leonard's, Denmark

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Hebrews 12.18-29, Luke 13.10-17

The themes of healing and rest are speaking to me after two weeks recovering from a flu! The word Sabbath means seventh day but is synonymous with the phrase 'day of rest' and what a good thing that is. All creatures take rest. Even migratory birds rest in the air – alternating between 'power naps' of a few seconds duration, and periods of drowsiness with eyes half closed, and periods of closing one eye then the other, to rest half the brain at a time. Even fish, while they don't close their eyes or stop moving altogether, settle to the bottom or find a protective rock and go into a trance. Some creatures also have an extended annual rest. I remember when I was a little girl in England, my Dad being very upset one day when he inadvertently dug up a family of hedgehogs hibernating at the end of the garden. We tucked the little spiny balls back into the earth, and I believe they survived the winter. Here, at this time, reptiles are dormant, and pygmy possums, bats, and echidnas enter prolonged periods of winter sleep, slowing their metabolic rate, preserving energy. Even evergreen trees have periods of rest from growing and budding.

We humans must also take rest – for our bodies and also our minds. But, perhaps alone among the creatures, we are also capable of overriding instinct and denying ourselves rest – of pushing through drowsiness and exhaustion, illness or injury. Or our overactive brains can fight our bodies, keeping us awake with anxious or obsessive thoughts. If we are wise, we will prepare ourselves calmly for sleep each night, and put aside periods during the day, the week, and the year to regenerate. I love the idea of a hibernating for a whole season though it is hard to pull off. If we are wise, we will also recognise at times of stress, illness, transition or heartache, that we need a prolonged period to pause, go slow, re-group, lie dormant, heal, and dream our way through a time of darkness or incapacity.

Even God, as our creation story tells us, takes a rest from the labours of creation, and bids us set aside one holy day in seven. Holy rest days are found across culture and faiths. Rest, physical, psychic and spiritual are endemic to the human condition – but sadly ignored by our culture of 24/7 year-round commercialism. Rest, it seems, is a part of the natural order which, to my mind, is to say the divine order. So, how do we move from this positive and holy instinct to rest to such a regime of negative rules and regulations about what should not be done? How do we arrive at the situation where Jesus is accused of breaking religious law by curing a woman bent double for 18 years on the Sabbath? Partly the criticism is disingenuous – designed to entrap the troublemaker – and becomes one of several accusations that will lead to his death. The Gospels record, significantly, seven occasions of Jesus healing on the Sabbath – his understanding of the day clearly went beyond the observance of inactivity. Jesus makes the link between rest and healing – the sacred work of healing is perhaps best done on the holy day of rest. Jesus also makes the link between the Sabbath rest and freedom – the shedding of burdens and loosening of binds – release from those things that burden us and hold us captive.

Just as we humans are capable of denying ourselves rest, we are also capable of subverting customs and practices intended for our health and sanity with rules and structures that are more to do with control and judgment than compassion and open heartedness. Before we condemn the Synagogue leader too roundly for wanting to entrap Jesus, it is worth remembering how the Sabbath laws came to be. In the Book of Exodus, Moses brings the people to the foot of Mount Sinai on a day of thunder, lightning, and thick cloud. It is enveloped in smoke as the Lord descends in fire and shakes violently as a trumpet blasts louder and louder. When Moses speaks, God answers in thunder. God summons the trembling Moses and Aaron to the summit – but does not permit the

people to approach – ‘set limits around the mountain and keep it holy’ God commands. Even animals, as Paul reminds us in the Letter to the Hebrews, are threatened with stoning to death if they touch it. (Heb 12:19) Moses sprinkles the blood of sacrificed bulls over the people to seal the covenant (Exodus 19: 16-25; 24:5-6) One of the ten commandments thus given to Moses concerns the keeping of the Sabbath Day. The Lord tells Moses that anyone who profanes or works on that day shall be out to death. And these commandments are *written on tablets of stone*. (Exodus 31: 12-17)

So, it is not surprising the Synagogue leader should be a little uptight! How are we to read this text now? Are we to have a critical distance from the portrayal of a terrifying God in Exodus, or see it as a part of the unfolding story of salvation? In the Book of Jeremiah, cited several times by Paul, a new covenant is promised. ‘The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a *new* covenant with the house of Israel and Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of Egypt ... I will put my law within them, and *I will write it on their hearts* ...’ (Jer 31:31-34 cf 1 Cor 11:25, 2 Cor 3:5-14) The law will shift from impermeable tablets of cold stone to reside in the living warmth of the heart. Do we see Jesus as the ‘mediator’ of this new covenant with a fearsome God, or, as John’s Gospel suggests, more the embodiment and revealer of a truth and a promise that has always been present – the eternal Word made Flesh?

For Paul, under the new and universal covenant of Christ, we are not to stand at the edge of God’s presence in fear and trembling, but enter into it, still in “reverence and awe,” but also freely - with joy and confidence, joining the living God in a festal gathering of angels and believers. He explains this with a paradox: “You have not come to something (some texts say ‘mountain’) that can be touched, a blazing fire, and darkness, and gloom” – but which you are nevertheless forbidden to touch - “But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God” - a place that cannot be touched, but where you have direct access to God. Mount Zion is a geographical place but also signifies the universal dwelling place of God – a heavenly Jerusalem – the place of the living God. This place is accessible to all by faith. “Faith,” Paul writes earlier in the letter – and the paradox is clearer in the King James Version – “is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.” (Hebrews 11:1)

Such faith, Paul says, shakes not only the earth but heaven also –the body and the soul. Faith in things unseen, is like God, a consuming fire. *Before* – the dark smoke warned people away from the divine spark. *Now* – we are called to enter the purifying fire that will consume all that is shakeable in us – our fear of mortality, our selfishness, and fear itself. The thing that cannot be shaken is the law of God *written on our heart* – the treasures of the heart– the things that make us rich even if our material wealth is taken from us (10:34). Having shaken off all that confines and terrifies us, we will come into the rest of God (cf 1:1-11). No longer wandering restlessly in the wilderness, we will come home to “God’s rest.” (4:8-9)

So, when Jesus supposedly breaks the fearful Sabbath laws by the healing outworkings of his loving heart, he both liberates and imparts “God’s rest” to those he touches – He is the living Word of the living God who makes us whole and frees us to join the celebration. He is the bearer of God’s rest – through his healing touch and also by his death and resurrection – the blood of the new covenant which Paul says, “speaks a better word than the blood of Abel” – the first blood shed through human transgression. Jesus calls us not only to receive this healing and enter into this joyful rest, but to follow him, and to do as he has done. We are each to be bearers of God’s rest to others. We might not see ourselves as miracle workers, yet love itself works wonders. And in a nice twist – we are called to this ‘work’ – not just on the Sabbath but on all seven days of the week. *Amen.*