

“Inflation & the Cycle of Blessings: The Currency of Wellness”

Exodus 20:8-11

Today we are looking at the currency of wellness. Wellness encompasses the physical, social, economic/financial, ecological, and spiritual dimensions of our lives. Our wellness takes intentionality on our part and on the part of the community. Yet, life comes at us with a variety of challenges that knocks off balance. At a time of high inflation, the stress seems to be even higher than usual. Think of the many people who are having to work many hours in order just to make ends meet. The pandemic has added an extra layer of stress for many of us and has isolated a lot of people from important social connections. Rapid inflation is causing us to sacrifice our health and the health of our planet for the sake of keeping the economy growing. The 24-hour news cycle of relentless bad news seems to wreak havoc on our mental health. The classic chocolate factory scene from the “I Love Lucy” show is an apt metaphor for our time. I want you to imagine our many challenges as the pieces of chocolate on the conveyer belt: <https://youtu.be/K3axU2b0dDk>.

How do we keep up while staying healthy? It seems like there is always a brewing storm of stress in our lives and in our world that keeps us on the edge. Today, I would like to invite us to consider the ancient practice of Sabbath keeping. This is actually one of the Ten Commandments given to the people of ancient Israel to help ensure their health and wellbeing. They were given to the people of Israel as they left Egypt where they were slaves and before they entered into the land of promise, their new home. These commandments were guides for the best ways to live in their new home and under the rule of God. The Ten Commandments were among a larger set of rules and guidelines for the people which provided for a life of abundance, justice, and peace in the community. For the people of Israel Sabbath keeping was not about learning to take a day off during the week. It was about learning to live a life of trust in God, a life of freedom and wholeness that was very different from their experience of slavery in Egypt. For their time in Egypt of over four hundred years, the ancient Israelites lived by the values of Pharaoh and their experience of slavery. The days of slavery in Egypt were days of hard labor and humiliation. The people of Israel had to work all the time with no time for adequate rest. In his book, *Peace*, Walter Brueggemann sets up a powerful metaphor for the experience of the Israelites in Egypt: “The Brickyard.” As anyone who has read Exodus 5 knows, the children of Israel were slaves to Pharaoh. They made bricks for Egypt. “A brickyard is a place of competent production. It is where bricks are made to specification and on schedule . . . The brickyard is also a place of coercion and profit. . . the brickyard is a place of unhappiness, oppression, and, of course, enormous hostility . . . Not only must we produce for the others, but there is no prospect, not in our wildest imagination, that things are ever going to change. There will never be enough bricks to meet the quota.” Walter Brueggemann states that Sabbath rest is about, “withdrawal from the anxiety system of Pharaoh, the refusal to let one's life be defined by production and consumption and the endless pursuit of private well-being” (*Journey to the Common Good*, 26). The Israelites had been schooled in the ways of anxiety. The Sabbath was God's strategy to break what they learned and teach them a new way. As slaves, the people of Israel forgot about the original goodness of creation and lived under the oppression of forced labor.

They needed to reclaim the goodness of their own life. Their sense of wholeness was at stake. That is why the practice of Sabbath was essential for their health as a people. It was not just about luxury living and having time to play. It was about the essence of who they were as the people of God who were called to enjoy and share the currency of wellness.

Today, we are challenged to examine our assumptions about what honoring the Sabbath means for our lives. What are the practices that allow us to live by the values of God's vision for our lives instead of the values of the Pharaohs of the world? Are there regular times and avenues for us to live by God's law in our daily lives? Whether we are working, retired, or looking for work, the invitation of Sabbath Rest is for each of us because it is an invitation to reorient our time and our life to God's spaciousness and freedom that makes life delightful, meaningful, and even more productive.

Most of us like the Ten commandments. After all, most of them are fairly easy to follow: Don't kill, don't steal, don't cheat, don't swear, and love God and your neighbor. But the one about honoring the Sabbath seems to be extra challenging for us. In theory, keeping the Sabbath does not sound like a very tough challenge, but in practice, it is very tough when we are trying to fulfill the many demands that are put on our lives: Work, housekeeping, raising children, paying the bills, preparing our taxes, caring for loved ones who are sick, caring for our own bodies when we are sick, fulfilling our church and social commitments of service, dealing with natural disasters or political divisions, and the list goes on and on. And if we are unemployed and looking for work, the pressures are even greater from how to make ends meet to filling out applications and seeking help to find new employment. With that kind of pressure there is always a sense of restlessness about how to remedy the situation. Even for some of you who are retired, keeping the Sabbath is not always easy as life's busyness comes at us all the time.

Sabbath keeping is about personal and communal practices that come out of the valuing of life and the gift of being. We tend to define ourselves by what we do or what we have. Sabbath keeping reminds us that we are precious to God just as we are without having to prove anything. The ability to rest is also an essential measure of our social wellbeing. Do people in our community have time to rest and be or are they stressed out about money or caregiving responsibilities that they cannot let go and be rejuvenated? In the movie, "12 Years a Slave" there is a scene about labor and the conditions of work that powerfully shows how important it is for us as human beings to have the ability to rest. This movie is about the true story of a free Black man from upstate New York, who was abducted and sold into slavery in the US. Here is the scene <https://youtu.be/zyRf7TjfiS0> What is surprising for you about the importance of Sabbath? How might we practice it today?

Sabbath by Christine Valters Paintner

God of holy rest,
on the seventh day you paused,
laying down the work of creation

and entered into sacred stillness.
Let us remember we were freed from slavery
in Egypt and you called us to be people of liberation.
Kindle in us the strength to say no
to a world of perpetual busyness.
Inspire us to set aside all of our plans
and goals to receive the lavish
gift of rest for ourselves.
Let the Sabbath be a time of profound renewal,
of intimate connection with You,
and a rekindling of our holy desires to be of service.
Sustain in us the desire to simply be
and not succumb to the demands
of productivity and an endless string of achievements.
Let our lives be a loving witness to a world
of restoration and refreshment,
of the profound goodness of joy and delight,
taking pleasure in the generous gift of pausing. Amen.