



February 2016 Message for Congregations and Lay and Rostered Leaders

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ –

Throughout 2016 I invite you to reflect with me on the theme of “Practicing Our Faith” as you gather for church council, adult study, youth group, coffee group, choir rehearsal and are engaged in learning, discernment and reflection together. Dorothy Bass has edited an excellent resource published several years ago by Jossey-Bass, *Practicing Our Faith*, which I will be using as a primary resource. Together with Don Richter, Dorothy Bass has also edited a second book, *Way to Live: Christian Practices for Teens*, published by Upper Room Books, which is also an excellent resource. Each article will include a Scripture reference, thematic reflection, questions for consideration, and a prayer.

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*Whatever is foreseen in joy  
Must be lived out from day to day.  
Vision held open in the dark  
By our ten thousand days of work.  
Harvest will fill the barn; for that  
The hand must ache, the face must sweat.  
And yet no leaf or grain is filled  
By work of ours; the field is tilled  
And left to grace. That we may reap,  
Great work is done while we're asleep.  
When we work well, a Sabbath mood  
Rests on our day, and finds it good.*

Wendell Berry, *Sabbaths*

### ***Keeping Sabbath***

The Sabbath pattern - six days of work, followed by one of rest - is woven deep into the fabric of the Bible - it is seen, fundamentally, as a gift! The root word means to cease, to desist. The idea is not that of relaxation or refreshment, but cessation from activity. The first story of the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures (Genesis 1-2:4a) climaxes on the seventh day, the first time there was a seventh day. Having created everything, God rests, and blesses this day, and makes it holy.

Later, God teaches the people of Israel to share in the blessing of this day (Exodus 16). After bringing them out of Egyptian slavery into the wilderness, God sends them manna, commanding them to gather

enough each morning for that day's food alone. Mistrusting, they gather more than they need, but it rots. On the sixth day, however, they are told to gather enough to last for two days. Miraculously, the extra does not rot, and those mistrustful ones who go out on the seventh morning to gather more food find none. God is teaching them, through their own hunger and nature's provisions, to keep the Sabbath, even before Moses receives the commandments on Sinai.

When those commandments come, the Sabbath commandment is the longest and, in some ways, the most puzzling. Unlike any of the others, it takes quite different forms in the two passages where the Ten Commandments appear. Both versions require the same behavior - work on six days, rest on one, but each gives a different reason. What is wonderful is that each reason arises from a fundamental truth about God's relationship to humanity.

*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 in your towns. For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and consecrated it. Exodus 20:8-11*

The Exodus commandment to "remember" the Sabbath day is grounded in the story of creation. The human pattern of six days of work and one of rest follows God's pattern as creator; God's people are to rest on one day because God did. In both work and rest, human beings are in the image of God. At the same time, they are not God but God's creatures, who must honor God by obeying this commandment.

*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. Deuteronomy 5:12-15*

In Deuteronomy, the commandment to "observe" the Sabbath day is tied to the experience of a people newly released from bondage. Slaves cannot take a day off; free people can. When they stop work every seventh day, the people will remember that the Lord brought them out of slavery, and they will see to it that no one within their own dominion, not even animals, will work without respite. Sabbath is a recurring testimony against the drudgery of slavery.

Together, these two renderings of the Sabbath commandment summarize the most fundamental stories and beliefs of the Scriptures: creation and exodus, humanity in God's image and a people liberated from captivity. In both remembering and observing, the Sabbath is understood to be gift.

Later, Christians continued to treasure the Sabbath commandment, along with the other nine commandments from Sinai. They also came to believe, however, that its meaning had changed with the new creation God began with Christ's death and resurrection. The holy day from now on, therefore, was not the seventh but the eighth, the day on which the future burst into the present.

As we enter the holy season of Lent I wonder how we might practice our faith through the keeping of Sabbath? What might this look like in our daily living this Lent? A practice of...remembering and observing.

Rest and worship. One day that, week after week, anchors a way of life that makes a difference every day.

**Read and Reflect:** Exodus 20:8-11 and Deuteronomy 5:12-15

**Discuss and Reflect:**

What in this reading leads you to say, "I wonder about..." or, "I noticed..."

What memories does "Sabbath" evoke for you? How have your patterns of keeping Sabbath changed during the course of your lifetime?

Dorothy C. Bass suggests resting from a few specific activities on the Sabbath, such as shopping, paying bills, and having committee meetings. If you were to keep Sabbath in your life, what activities would you most need to rest from?

When in your week or year do you experience real Sabbath? Where do you go, what do you do, and who are you with that contributes to this experience of rest and renewal?

Comment on the following: *Rest and worship. One day that, week after week, anchors a way of life that makes a difference every day.*

**Pray together:** *Gracious God, let your grace enfold us in confidence and peace, that we may know and be renewed in the gift of Sabbath rest. In Jesus' name. Amen.*

*The God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit (Romans 15:13).*

In Christ Jesus –

Shalom,

+Larry

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***Spirit -Led Leadership - Hope-Filled Discipleship - Innovative Tradition - Collaborative Partnerships***