

Sabbath Reflections 2

Capitalism and Inequity versus a Gospel Mandate

Sabbath: Presence, Not Withdrawal

Jesus had a number of controversial encounters with the religious authorities of his day. Many of these encounters were sparked by what the authorities considered to be unacceptable Sabbath activity surrounding the idea of work. Jesus was criticized for activities that ranged from plucking ears of corn (Matthew 12:1ff) to healing the sick (Mark 3:1ff) on the Sabbath day. By the first century of the Common Era, Sabbath had come to be understood as a day of withdrawal from activity, supposedly mimicking the example of God the creator who on the seventh day 'rested' from all his work.

There are a number of problems with this position. First, as we noted in the first study, the 'seventh' day is not to be understood as the last in a sequence of seven, but the day that embraces all that has preceded it. Indeed, the Sabbath is the crown or goal of creation.¹ Secondly, 'sabat', which is normally translated 'rest' does not mean cessation. Its more appropriate meaning is completion and 'being present to.' Thus, the Sabbath is a celebration of God being present to creation. Through this presence, the source of its blessing and hallowing is present. In like manner, Jesus the Incarnate Word of God is constantly present to all that comes into his presence. The sick, the hungry the alienated and forgotten are constantly the focus of his attention, not least on the Sabbath Day, the day through which life is especially celebrated.

If Sabbath, 'sabat,' being present to, is the goal of creation, then what is the means? Cessation is, indeed, very often the means. Most of us, at some time in our life, have been so busy that we have not been 'present' to those who have had every reason and right to expect our presence at home, or indeed at work. Most of us have also been on the receiving end of feeling isolated and alone because the one upon whom we have relied for affection and support is too busy with other matters. Cessation is not the goal, but it is very often *the means* to the goal.

In the year 2000 the Nobel Prize winning scientist, Professor Paul Crutzen,² described the present era as the 'Anthropocene.' What he meant by this is that all past eras have been marked by certain defining geological or biological transformations. For the very first time in the history of our planet, all of life is now directly or indirectly influenced by one species alone – humankind. We are so dominant that not only do we live in every corner of the earth, even the most inhospitable, but our influence affects the future prospect of every other species and impacts the rhythms and cycles of the earth that had previously been immune to the influence of any single species.

We have become ubiquitously present to the created order in a manner that stands in direct contrast to the Sabbath principle. We are present everywhere for the sake of our own advantage. The biblical idea of presence is 'blessing' to and for the other. When I am present to my children, spouse or work mates, I hear what they say, I understand their position and if I am truly present then I respond in a life giving manner. The contemporary manner of our presence to creation is not life giving, but is increasingly life destroying. It is said that in our lifetime we are experiencing the sixth great extinction of species;³ not as in previous mass extinctions, the result of a cataclysmic 'natural event,' but because of our own actions.

1. 'Rest infers that what was intended has been secured . . . When associated with sabbat (Sabbath), has a specialized meaning of "celebrate."'

Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament, Vol xiv (Grand Rapids: William B Eerdmans, 2004), 385.

2. Professor Paul Crutzen is a Dutch Nobel Prize winning atmospheric chemist.

3. The fifth mass extinction occurred approximately 65 million years ago and resulted in the death of the dinosaurs. It is commonly believed that this extinction was caused by an object colliding with the earth.

In addition, scientists have made us aware that the earth's climate and temperature are as much effected by heat that has become trapped, as by the direct arrival of the sun's energy. Scientists explain that greenhouse gases -- that is to say, the gases in the atmosphere that trap heat -- prevent us from being too cold. However, as these gases become denser, they of course trap more heat, the major cause of global warming. We have become aware that through our endless '24/7' activity and our voracious appetite for energy we are increasing the density of these gasses at a rate that exceeds any previous period of human life on this planet.⁴ (Geologists tell us there have been periods when the gases were more dense, but not during human habitation.)

It is, therefore, increasingly necessary that we learn to be respectfully present to creation. This clearly means that we must change our activity and lighten our footprint, so that our global domination does not reduce the capacity of the whole creation to flourish.

The biblical creation narrative continues past the first three chapters of Genesis and concludes in the Noah narrative and the covenant making between God and all living things (Genesis 9:1-17). God has created diversity: We are to be stewards or keepers of this diversity. The loss or diminishment of any part of creation means the diminishment of human life. Diversity is also an integral part of God's plan for life on earth. Unity and diversity exist within the Godhead too. The relationships of mutuality, which must exist within this diversity, are a window into our understanding of this unity and diversity. Harmony and wellbeing are not the outcome of dominance, but of sacrifice and service.

As Christians, our vocation must be to serve creation in the same way that God in Jesus serves us all.

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

1. 'Cessation is not the goal, but it is very often the means to the goal.' Think of yourself and your community. What could you cease to do in order to integrate the sabbath into your spiritual practice?
2. How do you react to the threat of a sixth extinction of species?
3. Take some time to name aloud examples of harmony and dominance. How could patterns of dominance in your life be transformed into harmony?

4. Scientists tell us the mean average concentration of Carbon Dioxide in the atmosphere prior to the Industrial revolution was 280 parts per million. The concentration is now more than 350 parts per million and will increase because of activity that has already taken place and will continue to take place. For long-term sustainability we are told that 350 parts per million is the density we should strive for.