

## Sabbath: Making All Things New by Nicole P. Lowell

Many years ago, my husband lived in Israel on assignment with the Air Force. One Saturday morning, soon after he got there, he pulled the lawn mower out of his garage and fired it up. He'd hardly gotten to the lawn itself when he looked up to find several of his Jewish neighbors standing at his fence, scowling and shaking their fingers at him.

It was, of course, Sabbath. Mowing the lawn was forbidden for them, but it was also frowned upon, even for the Gentiles in the neighborhood.

Sabbath. Shabbat. In Hebrew the word literally means: Quit. Stop. Take a break. If it were a traffic signal, Sabbath would be a red light, not just a stop sign. Not just a quick, rolling pause before proceeding, but a full halt, leaving your foot on the break. An interruption in the flow of your movement, a break of momentum.

What an odd thing. And really, it's so ancient; is it even relevant anymore? I mean, didn't that go out with the Old Testament sacrifices and such?

I've been reading about Sabbath recently, and regardless of what we think, it's hard to get around the fact that it's actually a commandment. Number four in top ten to be precise. "Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy..." So where did Sabbath come from? What is it for? Why would God ask us to do such a thing?

In Genesis 1 and 2, we get a remarkable story. It's also a familiar story, so it's easy to miss how incredible it is. "In the beginning..." In the beginning there is absolutely nothing except God, in the form of a Spirit, hovering over a void. And then God takes action. The first thing we see God do is work. He speaks, things are created, they are good things. Morning. Evening. Another day, and God does it again; He gets to work – creating, shaping, speaking, breathing.

But the 7th day is different. God still does some things, but they are very different things. Eugene Peterson pointed out that in Genesis 2, when the 7th day rolls around, God did four things: He finished, he rested, he blessed, and he made the day holy. The original Sabbath, the prototype.

After Genesis, the idea of a day of rest doesn't emerge again until after the Israelites have been freed from slavery in Egypt and they're wandering in the desert. The timing here is interesting to me. At this point, the people didn't actually have jobs; they didn't have routine work to do. They were literally wandering around in the middle of nowhere. And it was precisely into this lack of vocation, this big empty, that God pours the Ten Commandments, including one on taking a day off. The fourth commandment: "Remember the Sabbath to keep it holy."

Holy. What an interesting word. We hear it a lot and we sing it a lot, and when we do, we typically think we mean "perfection" and "without sin or stain." That might lead us to think that Sabbath is supposed to be a day of moral purity. But that's not quite the meaning.

The Hebrew word translated “holy” here literally means “set apart.” The Amplified Bible cracks the word open by including the description “withdrawn from common employment and dedicated to God.” In other words, Sabbath is a day that, essentially, is supposed to be different from all other days. This is what makes it holy, not specifically sinlessness, but the fact that it is “set-apart” and dedicated. It’s different.

This, by-the-way, is also what makes God holy -- his other-than-humanness, his set-apartness. And on Sabbath, we are invited to “be holy as He is holy” by setting aside our time, our effort, our labor. Sabbath reminds us, as Ruth Haley Barton pointed out, that we are finite. We cannot do it all. God, on the other hand, is infinite and whole. In Genesis we saw that God rested on the 7th day because He was finished. He commands us to rest because we are not. Sabbath is a day set apart for us to rest, to relax in His completeness, to know that His finishing work is part of our regular rhythm. This is why we need to keep Sabbath holy; we need time that is different and setting aside time is our path through the day of rest.

So let me create a little picture here for you, a picture of Sabbath. It begins with trail, a path different than the one we take any other morning. We’ll call the trail holiness.

But the trail isn’t the whole picture. In fact, there are problems if we only look at the Sabbath path of holiness. By Jesus’ day, the religious Jews who practiced Sabbath seemed to not be all that relaxed. They had focused so much on the setting apart, that they missed that a day of rest was a means to an end, a path to a destination beyond.

But before we rush too quickly to the destination (I know, I know, some of you are already wondering why we aren’t there yet), let’s slow down on this path, because it’s not just the trail that’s different on Sabbath, it’s the countryside, too.

Every week day, I drive the same roads to work. Everyday I park in about the same spot and come to the same desk and get geared up into the same work state-of-mind. But when I get a day to hike, I drive different roads on the other side of town. I walk out into unfamiliar terrain, a landscape that can catch me off-guard and surprise me. Odd-shaped trees, a close encounter with a bird, the way the light illuminates a meadow of grasses. While I’m on those trails, I’m surrounded by sights and sounds and smells that are unlike anything else I deal with 40 hours a week. And the truth is I pay closer attention; I notice things—both outside and inside.

So it is with Sabbath. It’s a day that, if we let it, can take us through amazing terrain. But what’s the point of that? Think about that for just a moment. In our incomplete, fallen, and twisted world, what makes you most open to God? A newborn baby? A sunset? An unexpected connection with an old friend? A moment in worship when we feel God come near? These things have the power to take our breath away, especially because they are not the result of anything we can do. Wonder of wonders!

But most of the time, we’re just too busy, too capable, to “on top of it” to make room for wonder. Enter the Sabbath command.

A day of real rest clears out the mental and emotional clutter. It opens us up to deeper amazement, deeper delight and awe for the One who longs for our undivided attention. Think of the last time you were truly able to step away from your “regular” life (maybe you can hardly remember!). Weren’t you more susceptible to seeing how beautiful your family was, more aware

of how miraculous life is, more alert to God's work in your heart? Sabbath gives us a regular chance to really look and really see, to really listen and really hear, to really accept and really receive the gifts of grace, love, mercy, beauty. And worship. Community worship on Sunday is just one obvious way to create this opening.

If holiness is the path of Sabbath, wonder is the terrain, the country of Sabbath. So what is the destination? Let me begin to answer that by quoting a short bit from the gospel of John:

*Then Jesus said to him, "Get up! Pick up your mat and walk." At once the man was cured; he picked up his mat and walked. The day on which this took place was a Sabbath. (John 5:8-9)*

In the next few verses, the Pharisees complain that this healed guy did "unlawful" work that Sabbath by carrying his mat. If you remember the story, you know the Pharisees confront Jesus about this. But before we get to Jesus' answer, stop for a moment and imagine, for the life-long lame man who was healed that day, what do you think the rest of his week was like?

In one word, he was transformed. And transformation is the destination of Sabbath for us, too. When we set aside one day a week to become aware of the magnitude and beauty of God, how could we not be transformed? How could our lives, slowly but surely, not become more and more in tune with the Lord of the Sabbath? How could our rest not begin to deeply impact the other six days—the work?

It seems that Jesus saw it this way, because when, later that day, the Pharisees question him about this Sabbath-healing business, Jesus said to them, *"My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I, too, am working* (Do you hear how that must have grated on the Pharisees who only saw Sabbath as "non-work"?) .... *I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself* (Do you hear him admitting his limitations?); *he can do only what he sees his Father doing* (Do you hear his openness to God's miraculous wonders?), *because whatever the Father does the Son also does."* (John 5:17, 19). In other words, the Sabbath leads to the transformation of our work by helping us to recognize that what's important is actually the Father's work.

We get so busy, so smart, so excited about our ability to multi-task and get the job done. It's easy to forget that God does not actually need our work. There's nothing that we do that He couldn't get a duck to do instead. This is just reality, folks.

But the Lord welcomes our participation with Him. He welcomes it because, I suspect, He enjoyed His creation work so much that He wanted to share. He wants our joy to be complete. And more than anything, He wants us to do what we see our Father doing.

Sabbath, ultimately, is a day set aside so that we can return our eyes to what the Father is doing. It opens the door to an awareness of God-at-work that we can take back to work. Ultimately, Sabbath can be used to transform our hearts, making us more and more accessible to the movement of the Spirit every day of the week. Making us more passionate about following, more aware of how we get in the way, more available to be used as fountains of restoration for others. Sabbath allows us to participate in our own re-creation, "making all things new," and to say with God, "it is good."