

On the Sundays that I am privileged enough to lead worship, I greet God. That may not seem like a surprising statement except that I greet God long before I arrive at church. When I lead worship, my common routine is to rise between 6:30 and 7:00 and put the finishing thoughts on the sermon. I have a quick shower and a bite to eat and try not to wake Victoria. I leave the house just before 8:00 and it is in that moment, that I greet God. Whether it is a bright summer sky, a wind swept fall sunrise, or a dark and crisp winter morning, I always have a sense of God's presence in the early hours of Sunday. I am ushered into a moment of sheer and unbridled praise where my soul yearns to sing and, if truth be known, I do sing in the cocoon of my vehicle. In the midst of such wonder I sing out the old hymn, "For the beauty of the earth, for the beauty of the skies, for the love which from my birth over and around me lies, Lord of all to Thee I raise, this my joyful hymn of praise."

Over the years I discovered, as I drove to the church, that there is little activity at 8 AM on a Sunday morning. The streets are mostly deserted. The Tim Horton's is mostly empty except for the occasional parent tagging along beside a kid in a hockey uniform. The mall parking lots are barren, the busy day of commerce has not yet begun. Sabbath

still exists at 8 AM on a Sunday morning and God seems very near.

The renowned Biblical scholar Marcus Borg writes of an old Celtic belief that there are certain people, times and places where the veil separating human reality from Holy reality grows very thin. In those instances we sense that holiness is close at hand, that The Holy One is giving us breath. Sunday morning at 8 AM is one such place for me. The Benedictine Abbey at Muenster is another place where the line between human reality and Holy reality is thin. It is a place where life is ordered by prayer rather than prayer being constrained by life. Five times a day the monks of the abbey leave their jobs in the classroom or at the printing press or on the farm and don their long black cassocks to gather in the chapel for prayer. More than the clock or secular agendas, prayer orders the lives of these men and in the atmosphere of that place God seems very near. Where does the veil become thin for you? Is there a day of the week or a time of day or a particular place where God seems to draw particularly close to you? In whose company are you reminded of the The Holy One? What is sacred geography for you? When do you experience Sabbath?

In his book Sabbath Time, Tilden Edwards describes growing up in downtown New York City in the years following World War II. He recalls

how Fifth Avenue was normally a bustling every day of the week except Sunday. He observes: "That was a long time ago. Fifth Avenue is a lot busier now on Sunday morning. Most avenues in the Western world are busier on Sunday." I heard an address by former Saskatoon minister barb janes who observed: "We in the church often lament the impact that Sunday sports has had on church attendance ... yet, when worship is over, many of us can be found gathering at a restaurant for lunch or filling up the car at the gas station or picking up a few groceries on the way home. It is easy to be critical of Sunday sports but most of us have shrunk the Sunday Sabbath to the one hour we spend in church, and then treat Sunday like any other day."

Let me be clear that the purpose of this sermon is not to argue for a return to rigid Sunday prohibitions on sports or shopping but rather to consider Sabbath as a spiritual event or practice in which the veil becomes thin and we are more attentive to our spiritual lives than to our material ones. Biblical ideas of Sabbath are more about resetting priorities than about curtailing joyful activities. In the 25th chapter of the book of Leviticus the command to imitate God by keeping a day of rest in every seven is expanded. Listen again: "The Lord commanded ... the seventh year is to

be a year of complete rest for the land when you do not plant your fields, prune your vineyards, or harvest the grain...(furthermore) you shall set the fiftieth year apart ... you shall proclaim freedom to all the inhabitants, return the land to its original owner ... the whole year shall be sacred for you.”

Suddenly the Sabbath is expanded so that it occurs not only once a week, but uniquely once every seven years, and for one year (the fiftieth) following every seven times seven years. In this way Sabbath is not only characterized as a day of rest for humans, but rest for the land itself once every seven years, and for restoration of justice to the community following every seven times seven years. Sabbath is counter-cultural. Sabbath asks us to stop seeing ourselves as human doings and instead to see ourselves as human beings ...the Sabbath is a day of faith when you acknowledge that not everything depends on your own feverish doing.”

I wonder how climate change might be affected if we simply rested every so often to enjoy ‘the beauty of the earth.’ I wonder what would happen if land and peoples were actually returned to their original status every fifty years. What would be the point of Russian aggression? Would land settlements with Indigenous peoples become a moot point?

Stopping production for a year or returning land to its original

inhabitants seems like a big leap, but could it be an outgrowth of personal sabbath practices? Tiffany Shlain is a mostly secular Jew who advocates for sabbath time in her book *24/6*. Tiffany is a prolific film producer who lives in California with her husband, a robotics professor at the University of California. Their lives are occupied with projects, consumed with creativity and, in some ways, frenetically busy. Inspired by her husband's sabbath practice of refusing to work on the Jewish Sabbath, Tiffany took it a step further and encouraged their household to completely cease using electronic devices for the Sabbath. She realized that even when she attempted to follow her husband's lead and 'not work' on Saturday (the Jewish Sabbath) that she was never far away from work or the world because her phones and tablets kept her constantly connected.

Her family took the bold step of setting aside all electronic devices for twenty-four hours once a week. She argued that sabbath time is so much harder to find when technology is accessible. Shlain did her research and discovered that cell phones were as addictive as alcohol, drugs or food leading some researchers to coin the phrase 'digital obesity.' She learned how important eye contact is for human connection whether it be mother and babe, friends in a restaurant or conversations with your spouse and

that constantly looking at phone interrupted this important dimension of communication. And so, she and her family decided to 'unplug' one day per week and led her to be an advocate of 24/6. Her family has maintained this practice for over ten years.

In order for a 24/6 practice to become meaningful it couldn't simply be about taking something away. What could take the place of checking emails, weather, Facebook, and your favourite news app? She decided it would be a version of the orthodox Jewish practice of Sabbath. Being more secular than religious Shlain wondered how to retain the opportunity for spiritual nurture without relying so heavily on her religious tradition. This is what she did. She concluded that the meal to begin Sabbath or Shabot (in Hebrew) was important. As a result they created a meal together as a family - often the same menu each week so it wouldn't be complicated – and then invited friends, extended family or people they vaguely knew but wanted to know better to their supper. They asked that their guests leave their phones alone during the visit. Supper begins with a form of blessing where they acknowledged the food, the people present and the roof over their heads. After supper everyone was invited to share intentionally about the past week. They identified four questions and

asked everyone around the table to share as they were comfortable. The questions were simple but engaging: 1) name something they are grateful for; 2) something in the week that they need to let go of; 3) something they learned, and 4) something they were looking forward to. They followed up Friday supper with a Saturday of being intentional about engaging in things they enjoyed such as casual conversation, journaling, reading, listening to music, excursions, exercise, and crafting. She concludes, “the key is to intentionally fill those 24 hours with things you love.”

I thought about intentionality being key to sabbath time. I’m sure the monks at St. Peter’s don’t always want to interrupt their teaching or their harvesting to pray but by being intentional, prayer begins to shape their lives. It made me think of sabbath-like practices that some friends and family engage in. My daughter is intentionally pursuing spirituality in her life these days. She has found her cathedral in nature, and I have observed her practice of pausing on a hike to hug a tree. I know there are many jokes about tree huggers, but I have come to understand that for my daughter it is a time of being thankful for the lungs of the planet and also a way of grounding herself, remembering that a walk in the woods is more about the experience than the destination.

This past week we spent some time with an old friend. She graduated from St. Andrew's with me but over the years has drifted away from being a Christian purist to a more generalized spirituality. As such she has found certain intentional practices important to her spiritual journey. As we sat down for supper the other four of us were ready to 'dig in' when she interrupted and explained that she had a gratitude practice in which a few times a day she would pause and acknowledge something she was grateful for. In that moment she expressed gratitude for this reunion of friends and how much she was enjoying it. I, for one, was moved by her intentionality. These seemed like Sabbath moments where I was reminded of the God who is always around me in nature and in human relationships.

In the Gospel lesson Jesus invites such creativity when he says: "The Sabbath is made for us, we are not made for the Sabbath." Jesus is criticizing a Sabbath time that is made up of "rules" and "shoulds." Jesus insisted that the Sabbath is made for us, not us for the Sabbath. Sabbath time is not something to be imposed upon us by an external authority be it church or state. Perhaps Sunday sports, Sunday shopping and all the other Sunday activities are a gift in disguise. We can no longer reduce

sabbath time to a single day or to rote activities. If we create sabbath practices, engage in sabbath moments, set aside sabbath days, we might just create a sabbath lifestyle in which we regularly experience God beckoning us through the veil touch the Holiness of life. And when we are reminded of how Holy life really is, we might just be gentler with our planet and with one another.

It rained last night and when I stepped outside this Sunday morning I was greeted with the wonderful smell of rain upon the land and my heart began to sing, "For the beauty of the earth ...". I pray that your Sabbath life is rich, and that you regularly peer through the veil and touch the soul of God. Might it be so. Amen.