

In the small town church that Walter Brueggemann attended as a child, the town grocer and his wife sat towards the front of the congregation every Sunday. And every Sunday at exactly the same time, usually when there was about five minutes left in the sermon, the grocer and his wife would stand up, carefully move to the end of the pew, and walk down the aisle to the back of the church and out the door. Every Sunday.

The reason was that the Lutheran church across town finished their services fifteen minutes earlier than Brueggemann's church, and the grocer left early so that he could get his store open to serve the Lutherans. Even as a child, Brueggemann wondered how the grocer could possibly have worshipped with one eye on the clock every Sunday.

Many of you know the feeling; shift work and retail work and many other professional and personal obligations cause us to miss church or leave early sometimes. I'm not pointing any fingers; I grew up milking cows on Sunday mornings before church, and no matter how much earlier we'd start, it seemed like Sunday was always the day when the tractor wouldn't start or the pipes were frozen or whatever, and we'd often slip into our regular pew five, ten, fifteen minutes late. And let's be honest, sometimes even when we're here, our thoughts are elsewhere.

Brueggemann said that his grocer friend was "multitasking," the state of participating in worship, while keeping "an eye on the clock for the sake of trade and profit."

We live in a multi-tasking world. When I sit down at my desk in the pastors office, I plug my laptop into a monitor so that I have two screens to work from. On one screen, I pull up my calendar and my digital to-do list, and on the other I usually have my email open along with several other browser tabs for whatever I'm working on. Plus, I usually have music on in the background, as well as my cell phone close at hand in case someone texts me or sends an email on my personal account.

That probably sounds pretty familiar to many of you. We are inundated with technology and tools that promise increased productivity and organization and time management. Though there is also a rising push-back to this, suggesting that multi-tasking really limits productivity by increasing distractions and limiting creativity.

Whether it makes us more productive or less productive, Brueggemann says that multi-tasking is counter to God's plan for Sabbath.

שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְהוָה אֶחָד  
*Sh'ma Yisra'eil Adonai Eloheinu Adonai echad.*

This is the first line of the central prayer of the Jews, repeated morning and evening for thousands of years. "Hear, Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One."

That last word is complicated. Echad. Literally, the number One. Yahweh- Our God - Yahweh - One. This is a statement of God's uniqueness, embracing monotheism against the multiple Gods of Egypt and most other ancient religions. And also a statement about God's character, that God is not divided or scattered but One, United, Consistent, Singular in purpose and character. God is One.

That resonates in the accompanying call for who we are to be: *Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. As God is Singular, you shall be singular in purpose, loving God with every part of your being.*

The word that comes to mind is wholeness.

Wholeness is the opposite of multitasking. Multitasking is driven by fear of not being enough, of needing to produce more, to have more, to not miss out on anything.

Wholeness is having enough, being enough, "nothing missing, nothing broken." Some of you recognize that as my preferred definition of the Hebrew word *shalom*.

That's a really abstract idea, but I think that the desire for wholeness is known to all of us. Some of us call it satisfaction, or health, or safety, or belonging, or being "normal," or complete, or fulfilled, or simply "happy." That thing that Bono sings about "still haven't found what I'm looking for..." That's *shalom*.

Harmony, unity, wholeness and justice, right relationship with God and with neighbours, this is what it means to be fully human. This is what God wants us to write on our hearts and impress on our children, to talk about at home and on the road, tied to our hands and our foreheads, written on our doorframes and gates.

*Shalom*, to be One as God is One.

How do we get there? In the Law of Moses, the key to *Shalom* was *Sabbath*.

A couple of weeks ago, I talked about the beginnings of Sabbath in the Exodus story of Israel. In this series we've followed Walter Brueggemann as he contrasted the Sabbath society of Israel with the Production/Consumption obsession of Pharaoh's Egyptian Empire. Pharaoh's worth was tied up in producing and controlling; God called the Hebrews to trust in God, to rest in God's care. Pharaoh's Empire was built on coercion and domination; God called the Hebrews to rest themselves and also to extend the grace of rest to others. Pharaoh marginalized and took advantage of minorities; God called the Hebrews to embrace and give place of honor to those who were outside of the norms.

*Sabbath as Resistance* by Walter Brueggemann

1 – Rest from Anxiety:

*Egypt: controlling and producing and consuming*

*God's People: resting and trusting in God's provision and goodness*

2 – Rest from Coercion:

*Egypt: forced labor and empire-building*

*God's People : law-keeping to maintain peace and build up neighbours*

3 – Rest from Exclusion:

*Egypt: elitism and marginalization*

*God's People : honoring the poor, the weak, and the foreigners*

4 – Rest from Multi-tasking:

*Egypt: restless pursuit and desire*

*God's People: True Worship, living wholly in the image of God*

And the final piece of Brueggemann's picture of Sabbath is true worship, a singular focus on God, contrasted with our human impulse to multi-tasking.

When we think of worship, we mostly think of what we do in church on Sunday mornings, or maybe individual moments of feeling close to God. For ancient Israel, worship was intended to be a whole system at the center of their society.

The core of this was the weekly Sabbath day of rest, with its list of prohibitions against working and producing and creating, and the accompanying list of encouraged worshipful practices. Beyond the weekly routine was a full yearly calendar of seven feasts and festivals. These annual festivals were the framework

of the system of Temple pilgrimages and sacrifices, the lifeblood of an entire tribe of Israelites.

Broader still, the book of Leviticus also describes a rotation of Sabbath years, that on the seventh year they were not to plow or plant in their fields or to prune their vineyards. For that sabbatical year, they were to let the land rest. They could harvest and live off of what grew naturally, but there was a break from agriculture. And finally, after seven sets of seven years, the fiftieth year was to be a “Year of Jubilee.” Again, there was to be no agriculture for that year, and all of the people were to return to the original territory of their clan. And if that land had been sold, ownership would return to its original family. And any debts were to be cancelled, and anyone who had been forced to become a slave or indentured worker was to be set free.

### *Ancient Israel as a Sabbath Society:*

*Weekly: Sabbath, ceasing from work every seventh day*

*Yearly: calendar of holy days and festivals, seven periods to mark the seasons*

*Sabbatical Years: rest from agricultural production every seven years*

*Jubilee: every fifty years, economic and social re-distribution*

The system of Sabbath was all-encompassing. And the point was wholeness, *shalom*, to arrange an entire lifetime around devotion to God, a framework by which every person could love God with all their heart, soul, and strength.

There is no historical evidence that the Year of Jubilee was ever practiced in Israel. Probably not the sabbatical from agriculture on the seventh years, either. The annual festivals and holy days and sacrifices were practiced rigorously, and Sabbath was keenly enforced as well.

However, the prophets like Isaiah and Hosea and Amos railed against these as empty practices:

Hear this, you that trample on the needy,  
and bring to ruin the poor of the land,  
saying, “When will the new moon be over  
so that we may sell grain;  
and the sabbath,  
so that we may offer wheat for sale?  
We will make the ephah small and the shekel great,  
and practice deceit with false balances,

buying the poor for silver  
and the needy for a pair of sandals,  
and selling the sweepings of the wheat.”  
<sup>7</sup>The LORD has sworn by the pride of Jacob:  
Surely I will never forget any of their deeds.  
<sup>8</sup>Shall not the land tremble on this account,  
and everyone mourn who lives in it,

The ruin of ancient Israel, says the prophet, came from a multitasking Sabbath.

“All the while they keep Sabbath,” writes Brueggemann, “they are in fact, in their imaginations, buying and selling and trading and bargaining. The appearance is one of *rest*, but, says the poet, the social reality is one of *restlessness*, for the pattern of acquisitiveness is not interrupted, even on the day of rest.” (p66)

This hits pretty close to home, I think. One of the particular quirks of Saskatchewan culture is how we compare holidays with everyone. “So, did you take any holidays this summer?” This is part of almost every casual conversation we have between April and October. And then we compare stories, “oh yeah, we did our usual family week at Waskesiu,” or “my sister’s best friend’s uncle has a cabin at \_\_\_\_\_ lake so we went there,” or hiking in the mountains, or visiting family in Manitoba, or whatever. And then from November to March, the question switches to “so, you going anywhere warm this winter?” :)

We love our holidays, especially those that take us away from the mosquitos or snowstorms. And that’s fine, but like Brueggemann says of ancient Israel, I wonder if “the appearance is one of rest, but...the social reality is one of *restlessness*.”

For one, our holidays for most of us are tied right into the cycle of consumerism. My family enjoys camping, and we have tons of camping gear. So much that one of the reasons we bought a minivan was so that we’d be able to fit all of our stuff in it when we go camping. All of that recreational equipment comes at a cost, which puts a strain on the budget, which puts pressure on to work harder, to earn more.

Or consider your hobbies - I like to play with small carpentry projects with the idea that I’m saving money by doing things myself... but that goes out the window after about the fifth trip to Home Depot to buy a new power tool to “do the job right.” Or I have \$500 of guitar equipment sitting in my basement, which I found time to purchase but haven’t found time to actually learn how to use properly.

I doubt I'm the only one who spends more time planning and packing for a trip than the trip itself, or whose favourite part of starting a new exercise routine is the shopping for the right shoes and equipment to do it. Our capitalist culture is an immersion experience. *Everything* is commodified and accessorized.

At what point do we find our attempts to find rest actually contributing to our restlessness? And I'm not pretending the Church is immune to this, either. Many of you invest a ton of your time off and your finances in making this community function. While I'm grateful for this, sometimes I wonder, does all of our church activity create more stress than it relieves? Even meaningful work can become part of the lie that the well-being of the world depends on our efforts.

Does our leisure time, our rest time, our worship, does this point us to wholeness, to *shalom*? Or does it lead us deeper into participation in the search for fulfillment through earning and purchasing and self-indulging?

What, then, is the alternative? What does it look like to be Sabbath people in 2016 in Saskatoon?

I have a couple of thoughts.

For one, the practice of Sabbath is going to cost us. We are part of an anti-Sabbath society. I don't think it's too strong to say that. The pursuit of wholeness is an uphill battle when society values production and consumption above all else.

What that means, I think, is that if we're serious about practicing Sabbath in pursuit of wholeness, we have to expect significant losses. If we truly rest more, we will by definition produce less, and that means losses in the scorekeeping mechanisms of our world: less money, less status, less influence and control. Some of our decreased productivity will be balanced by decreased consumption--*More With Less* is the Mennonite tradition, after all. But in general, by the definition of those around us, Sabbath is a deficit game. Do we trust that God's way is the better way?

With that in mind, whether you're all in on Sabbath or just trying it out, the formula is pretty straightforward: **Step towards that which gives life. Step away from everything else.**

What gives you life? On the Heikman family road trip to Vancouver this summer, we drove through Banff on the way west, and then through Jasper on the way back

east. And driving through those mountains, I could literally feel my spirit lifting. It was a physical sensation, being drawn upward, able to breathe more fully.

The other life-giving part of the trip was seeing old friends in Vancouver, stepping back into those communities that meant so much to us four years ago. It was so good, my heart was so full.

Mountains and deep friendships, those are two things that bring me life. And though mountains are in rare supply around here, there are spaces of natural beauty that can move my spirit upwards. So this fall I'm stepping in that direction, making space in my down time to seek out natural beauty--usually by the river, but I'm open to suggestions if you have any.

And deep friendships, well, I have a thousand excuses for why those are hard in this season of my life. Between work and kids and family, Keri and I don't have a lot of extra time and energy. But I can still step in the direction of life-giving relationships, by appreciating and investing in those I do have (even if they're not exactly like my friends in Vancouver), by taking risks to be vulnerable, and by making space in my life for people. Changes that won't necessarily lead to amazing relationships right away, but moving in those directions makes that kind of life possible.

What gives you life, and what would it mean to step towards those things? Meditation? Art? Exercise? Building or Fixing or Talking or Serving? It may not look like "rest" but if it brings you life, it's a Sabbath activity.

The other side of the coin is stepping away from everything else. It's amazing how much time I give to optional activities that don't actually contribute to my happiness, things that occupy my time and attention but aren't truly enjoyed. occupied but not enjoyed? What would it mean to step away from some of those things? Not so that I can be more productive, but so that my down time is genuinely restful?

I think the key to Sabbath in 2016 might be finding a way to distill the life-giving pieces away from the packages of life-draining stuff that typically comes with them. Like I said, almost every relaxing thing you can think of now invites us to spend money on goods or services as part of the experience. Can we find ways to enjoy gardening without investing in matching gloves and hat and pruning shears? Can we get together with friends without dropping \$50 or \$100 in food or

entertainment for the evening? Can we build something or bake something without comparing our efforts to others? Can we enjoy a good book or tv show without isolating ourselves or binge-watching every episode in the same weekend?

Step towards that which brings life, and step away from everything else.

A final caution: Sabbath rest is not self-gratification. As humans, we're not always so good at recognizing the difference between those two. Donuts do not bring life, at least not the second and third ones. Buying a new cell phone might bring you life in the moment, but what about the people and places that may have been abused in its production? Time away from responsibility is good, but at what point does holiday time become wasted given the meaningful contributions that you could make instead?

The goal is wholeness, not self-centeredness. "Do what makes you happy" on its own is a recipe to get back to the cycle of production and consumption. Because we're part of a system that is built on convincing us that what makes us happy is buying and consuming and our immediate gratification.

And so as we make choices on what is life giving and what is not, we follow in the footsteps of Jesus. As the Apostle Paul wrote in his letter to the Philippians,

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. <sup>4</sup>Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.<sup>5</sup>Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

<sup>6</sup>who, though he was in the form of God,

did not regard equality with God

as something to be exploited,

<sup>7</sup>but emptied himself,

taking the form of a slave,

being born in human likeness.

And being found in human form,

<sup>8</sup> he humbled himself

and became obedient to the point of death—

even death on a cross.

<sup>9</sup>Therefore God also highly exalted him

and gave him the name

that is above every name,

<sup>10</sup>so that at the name of Jesus



every knee should bend,  
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,  
11 and every tongue should confess  
that Jesus Christ is Lord,  
to the glory of God the Father.

This is the path to wholeness. Not consuming but becoming empty. Not controlling but becoming obedient. Not upward, but downward. Trusting in the God who brings life out of death, following the footsteps of Jesus.

And so as throughout this series on Sabbath, we are invited to the communion table, to remember Jesus' sacrifice and to draw strength from the gifts of grace and goodness that are offered freely to us.

Brothers and sisters: on the night before Jesus was crucified, he shared a meal together with his friends. During that meal, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he blessed it and broke it, shared it among them:

*This bread, Jesus said, this is my body, broken for you. Eat it, in remembrance of me.*

That same night Jesus also took a cup of wine, and when he had given thanks, again he shared it with all of them.

*This cup is the blood of the New Covenant, Jesus said. This is my blood, poured out for the many, for the forgiveness of sins. Drink, in remembrance of me.*

Let's pray: *Creator God, we put our trust in you. As you have given us life, we trust that you will continue to sustain us. As all the goodness we have known has come from you, we trust that you will continue to provide for us and love us without limits. Jesus, as you laid down your life, made yourself weak for us, gives us the strength to follow in this path for the good of others. Guide us to the life that comes from you, and fill us with your Spirit. Amen.*

*Come to me, all who are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. The body and blood of Christ. Come and find rest.*