

Sabbath -- Much More Than Just "Rest"



(Delivered by Tony Prete at the opening plenary of Pacific Yearly Meeting, 2006)

Soon after I accepted the invitation to address you in this plenary session, I learned that there were two points of view on the focus of this annual gathering and into the coming year. Some said the focus would be on Jubilee, the biblical idea that on every 50th year the Israelites would allow things to return to the way they ought to be: rest for the land, restoration of rights and dignity, everyone getting back what belonged to them.

The other point of view was that the PYM gathering and coming year should be devoted to discernment. As I understand it, some of this discernment has to do with the structure and function of PYM. But a lot of it also has to do with what it means to be a member of PYM -- or for that matter, of the Religious Society of Friends.

So I had two choices -- Jubilee or discernment. Well, like any good liberal unprogrammed Friend, I chose neither. Instead, I decided to choose both, and to do so by way of the Sabbath (the Forth Commandment, the one everybody forgets). Let me explain. First, the Jubilee Year. I won't go into much detail because you will be getting a thorough explanation of it in tonight's plenary. For my purpose here, let me just mention that the Jubilee year comes after seven Sabbath Years. The Sabbath Year comes every seven years. And the Sabbath itself comes every seven days. The progression, then, is from Sabbath to Sabbath Year to Jubilee Year -- seven days, seven years, seven times seven years. The Sabbath Year and the Jubilee Year, then, are rooted in the weekly Sabbath, to talk about the Sabbath is to talk about the Sabbath Year and the Jubilee Year as well.

What about discernment? How is that related to Sabbath? The word *Sabbath* is Hebrew and comes from the verb *shabat*, which means "rest" only indirectly. Like most Hebrew words, its meaning is more concrete and specific. *Shabat* literally means "to cease, to desist, to come to a dead stop." Let me give you an example. *Shabat* as "rest" is like what you might do when you're out driving and you come to a red light: -- enjoy a few moments of inactivity. *Shabat* as "dead stop" means: you pull into the driveway, turn off the key, open the door, get out of the car, and walk away.

Now, here is where the connection with discernment comes in. As we will see, the Sabbath deals with what you do after you walk away from the car, what you do after you have come to a dead stop. And what you do -- as the Bible explains it -- is to reflect on and renew your covenant relationship with God and your faith community. In other words, the essence of Sabbath is not just that you rest or stop, but that you discern. Without discernment, Sabbath is just time off, a chance to sit around and do nothing, or maybe read a book, or cut the grass (Do you still have grass?) or go for a walk. These are all fine things to do. But they are not Sabbath. Sabbath is discernment.

¹ THE BOOK OF EXODUS 20:8 Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy.20:9 Six days you shall labor and do all your work.20:10 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.20:11 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.

THE BOOK OF DEUTERONOMY 5:12 Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy, as the LORD your God commanded you.5:13 Six days you shall labor and do all your work.5:14 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.5:15 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.

So, discernment is the substance of Sabbath, and Jubilee is a super-sized Sabbath. To talk about Sabbath then, is to talk about Jubilee and discernment. And to talk about Sabbath is to talk about the fourth of the Ten Commandments, the one that deals with the seventh day of the week.

The Bible tells of the giving of the Ten Commandments in two places: the book of Exodus and the book of Deuteronomy. Though both books did not achieve their final form until some 1500 years after the stories they relate, Exodus seems to be based on earlier traditions than is Deuteronomy. We see this in the words of the Ten Commandments. Both texts are similar, but Deuteronomy makes significant changes, especially in the Fourth Commandment. These changes reflect a new perspective, evidence that the biblical text is not -- if you pardon the expression -- chiseled in stone. Just as Quakers speak of "continuing revelation," so the biblical text underwent reinterpretation and reformulation as time and circumstances changed.

Now, getting back to the Fourth Commandment. I said that it was significantly different in the book of Exodus and the book of Deuteronomy. The major difference -- and this relates directly to issues of discernment and Jubilee -- is the reason the text gives for maintaining Sabbath. In Exodus, the foundation of Sabbath lies in the creation account. It reads:

For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, sea and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and consecrated it.

This ties the Sabbath directly to the creation account that opens the book of Genesis. That account, I need to point out, is not about God creating something out of nothing; in the mind of the ancient writer, prior to creation there existed chaos. God's creative action was to push back that chaos by establishing areas and boundaries -- thus bringing to the world a reassuring order and predictability. So the text in Exodus places the Sabbath orientation on God the Creator, and on the good -- indeed, very good -- elements of that creation. Jubilee focuses on that creation. Beginning with the rest for the land, on up through forgiveness of debts and restitution of property, and finally to setting slaves free, Jubilee works toward restoring creation to what God hopes it will be.

It would seem that the Sabbath rest is an imitation of the divine rest -- God rested on the seventh day, we rest too. But the text says much more, some of it is surprising -- or confusing. It begins by telling us that the heavens and the earth and all their multitude were finished by the end of the sixth day. But creation was not finished. As the text says, "on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done." Only then did God rest. As for what that work was, we are told only that "God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it." The final act of creation, after all the material world is completed, is the blessing of a day -- the blessing of time.

So time is part of creation, and as such it shares the characteristics of creation: it's there for us to cooperate with, to respect, to treat kindly. It is not our enemy. We act in uncreaturely fashion when we abuse it. That has nothing to do with Sabbath per se, it just says that, like everything else in creation, time is God's gift and we should use it wisely.

As a part of creation, time brings to creation a rhythm of working and resting, and creation will not be complete as long as that rhythm is not honored. Everyone, everything deserves rest -- a period of time when they can safely cease their activities, a time when the lamb can lie down with the lion -- and not wake up as lamb chops. That's why, to quote Terence Fretheim, "Sabbath-keeping is an act of creation-keeping." The Sabbath year and the Jubilee expand this basic principle. They are a time of rest, not just for the Israelites but for subordinates, servants, foreigners, the animals, and the land itself. All deserve a rest -- a release from restlessness. That is the divine plan, the divine hope, and to keep the Sabbath is to participate in that plan and hope.

So we are called to rest as God did, but how does God rest? It is clear from the Genesis account that creation is not something that God did and then walked away from. Yes, God stops working, but God still hangs around. Why does God hang around? The scriptural answer is that God wants of to be continually present to creation, allowing it to be what it is, and enjoying the ongoing relationship that this mutual presence brings.

Sabbath thus requires that we view the world theologically, not just as "nature" but as belonging to God, having a relationship with God, and being blessed by God. By viewing the world in this manner, we recognize that it has a value far beyond its utilitarian purposes. To preserve and protect the earth means more than simply assuring that it functions as a natural resource. It means honoring the earth -- or as we would say today, a cosmos -- as a possession of the divine, a partner with the divine, and a creation authenticated by the divine.

In Deuteronomy, the foundation for Sabbath is no longer creation, but liberation. The text reads

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.

The emphasis here is on God the Deliverer. The discernment we all face -- and especially that PYM now faces -- is to figure out what kind of slaveries are afflicting us and how our faith can set us free. Of course this is not peculiar to PYM. We see in the world around us all kinds of slaveries afflicting people at every level of society -- from the brutalities of poverty and hunger, to the subtleties of consumerism and affluence. To address these slaveries, none of us, I'm sure, would subscribe to a purely "religious" solution. But I think we would agree that attempted solutions, when they are devoid of any spiritual foundation, when they lack any recognition that our efforts to deliver ourselves and others from slavery are catalysts by which the divine Deliver intervenes, such solutions fumble and fade and eventually fail. Faith-grounded discernment, on the other hand, can lead us to ferret out the slaveries that afflict us and find ways to break free.

By applying the different foundations for Sabbath, creation and deliverance, we can understand why Jubilee and discernment are vital to Sabbath rest.

Despite those differences, the two versions do substantially agree. Except for some small additions in Deuteronomy, the two texts agree that Sabbath means: work for six days, do not work on the seventh day. This itself is a radical departure -- indeed, a bold challenge -- in the society of its time, and applies to discernment today. Everyone worked every day, it was the only way to survive. To forego working on any particular day, especially if that day recurred every week, was to jeopardize your livelihood and your life. This demanded a profound trust that God would hold true to God's Word, keeping chaos from creeping back in by inviting goodness. It was indeed a radical departure from the commonsense approach to managing work in the ancient world. (Just as it is today.)

This Sabbath rest idea is especially important because, at the time this text reached its final form, the Israelites were under the thumb of the Persian empire. And like any conquered people, they were subject to the demands and expectations of their conqueror. Top on that list was tribute, generally paid in the form of produce and livestock. In short, lots of their livelihood -- some estimates put it at more than half -- disappeared in tribute -- and that came off the top, whether you had a good year or not. To not do everything in your power to meet those taxes -- for example, by not working every seventh day -- was to take a bold and daring stand. Not only did it mean you answer to a more powerful authority than the Persian overlords, it also meant that you challenged the very system by which they ruled -- their laws, their

structures, their military. Thus, Sabbath rest was a radical departure from common sense, and a bold challenge -- a countercultural statement -- against the ruling class.

It made sense that the God of the Israelites would command the Israelites to rest -- crazy and counterintuitive though that may seem. Even more crazy was the idea that God would extend Sabbath rest to family, to indentured servants, to animals, and to foreigners (who generally hired themselves out to landowners as workers). I said earlier that the word Sabbath means not just "rest," but "stop, cease, come to a dead halt." And now this work stoppage is extended to everyone and everything involved in the work process. The Deuteronomy version, adds that this stoppage includes "your ox and your donkey," the beasts who bore the burden of hauling and transportation. Deuteronomy also adds that slaves have coming to them not just any rest, but exactly the same rest as each Israelite enjoys.

Sabbath rest, then, means not only do you not work yourself, but that you not require or endorse the work of those from whom you benefit. They all got the day off (It would be like refusing on Sunday to shop, to watch professional sports, to go to a restaurant -- to do anything that requires others to work. Hmmm, chew on that.) Then and now, not only is it crazy, but think of what a challenge it would be to the economic system.

We need to look at one other similarity in the two texts. Both of them say about the Sabbath day "keep it holy." What does that mean? First, "holy" in Hebrew has nothing directly to do with morality or even virtue. To call something "holy" does not necessarily mean that it is righteous or even good. Instead, the Hebrew idea of holy is that something is set apart, it is no longer part of the ordinary and the every day, or used in a common way. Instead, it is oriented toward God, focused on God, put in the service of God. And that's why discernment -- at least the way Friends understand it -- is an appropriate Sabbath activity. When we discern, we open ourselves to God's voice, we seek where God is leading us, we ask what God is expecting of us. And while we can do that at any time, doing it on Sabbath is especially appropriate. It is a way to keep Sabbath holy. Sabbath is discernment time.

Important nuances to this requirement arise from the form of the single Hebrew verb that is translated here as "keep it holy." First the form connotes activity, doing something. This is part of the reason why rest is not sufficient for fulfilling the Sabbath. We are called to do something with that rest. The verb form also involves intentionality. It's not just that you do something, but that you do it intentionally, on purpose, with desire and determination. That too is part and parcel of discernment -- we engage in it actively, intentionally, determinately.

Let's recap. As expressed in Exodus and Deuteronomy, the Fourth Commandment, in its call for a work stoppage on every seventh day, is a challenge to the harsh practicalities of survival, but also to the power that makes demands and sets up rules for those who are trying to survive. In that alone, it is a call to Jubilee and to discernment. A call to Jubilee because it places a premium on the dignity and the rights of all creatures. A call to discernment because it forces a reconsidering of how we treat work -- our own and that of others -- in our hierarchy of values, and how far we are willing to "go against the grain" when it comes to the practices of our culture and the requirements of our authorities.

Having looked at the similarities, we need to look at one last difference.

The first thing to notice is that each one begins with a different word. Exodus begins with "remember the Sabbath day"; Deuteronomy begins with "observe the Sabbath day." In English they don't seem that different; in Hebrew each is a rich and unique term.

"Remember." It is hard to overstate the biblical importance of the verb that is translated "remember." The word is *zkr*, and its meanings include: think about, meditate upon, pay attention to; remember, recollect; mention, declare, invoke, commemorate. The word appears 288 times in the Bible. Its importance is reinforced by the frequent use of its opposite, "to forget" (*skh*), which appears 122 times. (Note, by the way, that this tension between remembering and forgetting, by the people as well as by God, is a major dynamic throughout the Bible, especially in the Psalms.)

The Hebrew word *zkr* ("remember") includes in its scope of meaning the idea of taking appropriate action. Thus, remembering is not simply a mental action, it includes doing some external thing. To remember the Sabbath, then, involves thinking about it, meditating on it, paying attention to it, recalling it -- all accompanied by an appropriate corresponding action. A Jubilee focus on remembering the Sabbath might involve working with the poor and marginalized, or protecting the earth. A discernment focus might involve altering, eliminating, or creating ways by which we as Friends interact with each other and with the people and the world around us.

Finally, *zkr* describes a reciprocal relationship between the one remembered and the one remembering -- in this case, Yahweh, whose very being is relationship, and Israel or individual Israelites. Any authentic remembering of the Sabbath is thus a spiritual relational act.

The Exodus account has "observe" instead of "remember." The verb is *shamar*, and appears in the Bible over 450 times. Its basic meaning is "to exercise great care over." Another is "to pay careful attention to," "to take care of," "to guard." Yet another is "to give heed to." Finally, it can also mean "to preserve" or "to store." There is a strong intentionality in all this, making the English word "observe" a rather weak translation. Observing the Sabbath is something one does carefully, attentively, protectively, receptively. If "remembering" the Sabbath, as we saw, connotes thoughtful activity, "observing" the Sabbath connotes intentional caring and attention.

The final major difference -- and here is where I think Sabbath comes closest to Jubilee and discernment -- is the last verse of each version, the one that provides the foundation for Sabbath practice. In Deuteronomy, you may recall, it reads:

Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with the mighty hand and an outstretched arm;

The reference, of course, is to the exodus from Egyptian slavery. Though brief, this is a text heavily weighted with meaning and significance for the Israelites. Just a few words are all it takes to conjure up powerful and profound images. It is as though one would say today "Twin Towers" or "9/11" -- we would need no more to bring back that horrible experience in all its grim detail. Or the words "wedding" or "graduation" or "summer camp" to bring back the joyful particulars we may have experienced in each of those events. For the Israelites, the weighted words were "slave" and "brought you out."

It does not take much to imagine the wound that the word "slave" would expose -- pain and depression, injustice and forced labor, hunger and weariness, fear and shame. But that re-opened wound is immediately soothed by the balm of those other words "brought you out." The word in Hebrew is *yatza*, translated "I brought you out." But it's not "brought" in that sense of "take along with" or "deliver." It's causative. It means "because of *me* you went forth," "*I* was the driving force behind you're going forth." The emphasis is on God's mighty intervention. The escape from slavery to freedom is all God's doing.

The final Hebrew word that we will consider is one we have already seen -- "remember." Here it reminds the Israelites to recall their liberation from slavery. As I said earlier, this is no simple word -- like "did you

remember the keys?" Or (as I find myself saying more and more these days) "I don't remember why I came into this room." Rather, it is a deeply profound and personal word. It means: To look at intently, to ponder, to meditate on, etc. it is scattered throughout the Hebrew Scriptures -- with the prophets asking the people to remember God, and the lament Psalms asking God to remember the psalmist. It is a remembering that takes concrete expression in an external action; it is a determined and disciplined effort. And it is relational; it says to each Israelite: put yourself in contact with what it meant to be a slave, and what it meant for Yahweh to bring you forth into freedom.

I propose that remembering, in the biblical sense of the word, is a form of discernment. We tend to focus our discernment on present or future situations and conditions, and of course that is rightly ordered. But is that enough? Are we not a faith community with a history? Are there not those among us, past and present, who experienced in the events of normal living a divine presence -- even more, a divine "leading"? Can that not be an occasion or model for recognizing the divine presence in *our* day-to-day lives, as individuals and as members of the faith community?

Such discernment is an act of reexperiencing the past as a way of understanding the present. When Jewish people today celebrate the Passover at a Seder, they do not recall the Exodus in terms of what happened to an ancient "them" -- the Hebrews of old. Instead, they do so in terms of "we" -- those present here and now, who are experiencing the present through the lens of what past generations have experienced: "On this night *we* were freed...."

By discerning the present through the lens of the past we create the opportunity to imagine what the future could be. It can be hard to imagine the future just by focusing on the often discouraging present. But if we can use the past to put the present in perspective, we will be more encouraged to imagine -- with a trust and conviction strengthened by the past -- what a more rightly ordered future could be. We approach what Scripture scholar Walter Brueggemann calls "an imaginative commitment to 'what if...!'"

What is this past that we can draw on to clarify the present and imagine into the future? I propose that it is more than simply the history of the Religious Society of Friends. I propose that it is also our Judeo-Christian history -- the one out of which the Religious Society of Friends sprang -- and includes the narratives that recall God's actions with the people of Israel and with the early church. To do less is to deprive ourselves of perspective and conviction. It is to close our souls within a ghetto when we have a whole world to inhabit. If Friends are to survive as an effective and recognizable source for good on this earth, we need this broad and enriching perspective. True discernment -- true Quaker discernment -- allows for no less.

This has been a long talk, and I appreciate your patience. Let me close with a summary and an exhortation.

Sabbath incorporates two elements: rest and restoration. The "rest" has to do with a stepping back from one's ordinary daily frenzy and looking at what we do in the light of the covenant relationship, the God of the covenant, and the demands and enticements of Empire. The "restoration," encompasses social justice and restoring of the rights to the oppressed; it also encompasses restoring the covenant relationship between ourselves and each other and God. This restoration of the covenant relationship is not a matter of simply "getting right with God" but of restoring priorities, restoring ourselves to our obligation to acknowledge our status as creatures and to reorder our lives so that we are better able to reject living by the allure and the struggle and the constraints of the culture of Empire.

Thus, Sabbath stands as a challenge to the prevailing culture, be it pyramid-building or nation-building. The Bible is not just a book of moral do's and don'ts to be trotted out in support of someone's bias, nor is it just a collection of quaint stories from which little children can draw lessons. It is a saga of ongoing interpreted

experiences that shows how our ancestors faced challenges that confronted them, sometimes overcame them and sometimes were overcome, but never abandoned the God who creates and delivers.

In the Hebrew Scriptures this interpretive process took its final form around the Babylonian captivity (598 - 537 B.C.E.), when the Israelites felt they had lost everything, even their God, and were struggling to reestablish their identity and their integrity –all the while under the watchful eye of the repressive society that ruled over them. We too are people of exile, we continue in exile, and we need to recognize what it means to be in exile.

As people in exile, we do not have the luxury of dabbling in this trend, or that new idea, or some clever thought that catches our fancy. As people in exile we need to ask ourselves what it is that we really cherish. So I ask: Is it time to question whether we have settled for the cheap grace of developing our personal potential over the cry of a the marginalized world of undeveloped human potential? (For on the text says "love your neighbor as yourself," not "hold off loving your neighbor until you love yourself.") Is it time to ask ourselves whether we have created God in our own image, a soft teddy bear God who would never condemn in the face of evil, would never hold accountable those who flaunt the ways of righteousness, would never mete out justice and even the punishment of allowing us to experience the consequences of what we do or don't do? Is it a time to ask ourselves whether dissecting every nook and cranny of our Quaker structures and processes is worth more than the scrutinizing the boot print that Empire leaves on the earth? Perhaps, dear Friends, we can incorporate into our rich Quaker ways -- worship, fellowship, committee and business meetings -- some of those questions. Is our personal journey distracting us from humanity's forced march? Is ours a laissez-faire God who comforts the afflicted but it will not afflict the comfortable? Is our Quaker microscope keeping the wider world out of focus?

I ask these questions because I fear we live in a nation that is under the judgment of God. I believe this nation has flaunted and abused and puffed up its place as one of God's creatures. It has ripped the land from its original inhabitants and then wreaked ruin on them; it has enslaved a whole people, first in the chains of forced labor, then in the chains of forced poverty; it has gorged itself on the world's resources and left others to scramble for the scraps from its table, even as they choke on its belching and flatulence; it has brushed aside the convictions of other world cultures, and demanded -- frequently at gunpoint -- that they kneel before the idols of capitalism and democracy, that they adopt a way of life that increasingly marginalizes those who lack wealth and influence, even as it barricades and protects those who have. It markets a culture that elbows aside the weak, the elderly, and disabled with its emphasis on strength and beauty and power, a culture where rights triumph over duties and where privilege trumps poverty.

For these many reasons, I fear that this country is under the judgment of God. And I believe that each of us, in our discernments and in our activities, will have to answer the old question – voiced first by exploited coal miners, then by civil rights workers, and pacifists, and conscientious objectors, and modern-day prophets -- "Which side are you on?" This is not a question to be answered with songs and letters and protests and proclamations. It is a question that is answered by what Friends believe, how they live their lives, how much each of us is part of the covenant and how much we are part of the Empire.

The Sabbath rest is a time of re-membering, a time of renewal, a time of repositioning. It recalls the ancient Hebrew word *shuv*, to turn, to be transformed -- not just what you turn your back on, but what you turn your face toward.