

We will have a focus on sabbath-keeping this Lent – cultivating this ancient spiritual practice that is so needed in modern life, and so profoundly counter-cultural in our frenzied, data-driven, get-it-done world.

To take one day out of seven to be non-productive refreshes and renews our bodies, minds and spirits so that we can be more focused and creative the other six days.

A sabbath day is a day off the treadmill of busy-ness and achievement. It is a mini-retreat every single week.

Now, it might be a stretch to call Jesus' sojourn in the wilderness a retreat – but I imagine that's what it started out to be: a time of discernment at the beginning of his public ministry that was launched at his baptism. The gospel writers all say that as soon as he had had that experience of immersion in the Jordan River, and the Holy Spirit coming upon him, and the voice of God claiming him as beloved Son, that Spirit drove or led him into the wilderness where he was tempted and tried for forty days.

Why would Jesus need a retreat at the start of his mission?

Remember – he was 30 years old at this point; he had been living a full life in Nazareth, perhaps working in his father's carpentry business, taking care of his younger siblings and his mother. He had friends, activities.

The gospels don't tell us what impelled him to leave all that and show up at the Jordan where his cousin John was baptizing people – wouldn't that be a good story! – but we know he made a huge life change.

From now on his life would be entirely focused on something else – on God's mission to reclaim, restore and renew all of creation to wholeness in God.

He needed time for that transition. We might call it a vision quest.

He needed time with his heavenly father, to discern just what God was asking of him. And he needed to know his adversary, what would come against him.

So he went into wilderness, away from people, activities, distractions.

For forty days – like Moses getting the Law on Mount Sinai – he stayed still.

He fasted – as people often do when they want to hear God's voice.

He prayed, deepening his relationship with God.

He listened to the voice of his Father, got used to the presence of the Spirit.

He fought off temptations, honing his core strength and power to resist evil. And after forty days, when he might have been at his weakest, the real trial begins. We're told he was tempted daily, but now the devil brings on the big guns. So he goes: "If you are the Son of God..."

The first temptation is to invite Jesus to doubt his identity. That's how he gets us too – doubt, or forget, your identity as a beloved child of God, in whom God delights, and you're easy pickings.

Then he says, "Wow – forty days, you must be really hungry. But look at the power you have – you could command these stones to become bread." "Look at this whole world, as far as your eye can see. It's mine, and I'll give it to you if you'll worship me. You can have power beyond your wildest imagining!" "Okay – if you are God's Son, he'll protect you – so jump off the top of the temple. You'll be fine!"

The temptation to consume more than we need, to seek power that belongs to God, to put our security in powers other than God – all these keep us estranged from God.

These temptations also come to us when we make the courageous choice to get off the treadmill ourselves, and to rest one day in seven.

The devil, whom a wise woman I knew called "the Enemy of Human Nature" is invested in separating us from God.

So on a sabbath day, we may be tempted by our appetites – to numb ourselves with too much food or drink or mindless entertainment.

A sabbath day is meant to be joyful and fun, but not numbing.

The gift of a sabbath day is being alive in God's creation and in the gifts and people of our lives. That restores our souls.

And one of the chief obstacles to actually taking a day off the treadmill is the lie that we are in charge of our lives.

The devil is still getting mileage out of that one.

"I'm too busy to stop." "If I can just get these three things checked off the list..."

"I'm too important to stop working." "My life is too complicated to take a day off."

What are these but the temptation to think we are in charge of the world?

We don't think of it that way, of course, but at the heart of our drivenness

is the misguided notion that we have to do the work,

and a profound lack of trust in letting God work through us.

Sabbath-keeping resets the score, reminds us that it's not up to us.

Another thing that can impede our putting our spiritual lives first – which is what we’re doing when we enter this spiritual practice – is the desire for security. We keep working to earn our daily bread instead of trusting God for it; we build up our bank accounts and investment portfolios and insurance policies. Those are not bad things – I rely on them – but I often sense I rely on them more than is good for me. Because Jesus didn’t live that way, and those who left their homes and work to follow him didn’t live that way, and plenty of saints throughout the ages have not lived that way. And they had what they needed and often more. We don’t have to work 24/7 to be assured of plenty and security. Taking a sabbath day is an assertion that God will provide for us, as we obey his command and receive his gift of time and rest. It is a YES in the face of all the “what if’s” and “uh-ohs” in our lives.

One of the busiest, most “get it done” people I know is Bonnie Rafer, and she is taking the sabbath challenge this Lent. Her sabbath will be Sunday. She said that yesterday she really focused on getting tasks done and out of the way so she will be free today to worship, enjoy lunch out, rest, do needlework. She usually would have dithered through tasks both days, but she is trying this. I can’t wait to see what God will bring about through Bonnie taking sabbath! I can’t wait to see what God could bring about through this community trying on this spiritual practice. I think it really can spread contagious peace.

God gives us our daily bread – plenty.  
God empowers us with God’s Spirit to be in charge only of what God has given us.  
God give us eternal security – which doesn’t always mean safety in this life, but means assurance of God’s presence and peace with us always.  
God wants us to live in that peace always, and to share it.  
Join Jesus off the treadmill one day in seven this Lent...  
it may feel like wilderness, but wilderness is so often where we meet God.

Amen.

**Luke 4:1-13**

After his baptism, Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'"

Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And the devil said to him, "To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours." Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'"

Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written,

'He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,' and  
'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'"

Jesus answered him, "It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.