

Praying with the Rhythms of Grace

BY JUDY HENDERSON PRATHER

At the heart of the creation story in Genesis 1, and in God's life-giving gift of sabbath, are patterns of ebb and flow, and of repetition. These rhythms of grace recommend practices of prayer that will help us to reclaim sabbath keeping.

In the beginning, God created a rhythm in life. Read Genesis 1 aloud, as the poet would read it, and the rhythm is unmistakable: "And there was evening and there was morning, the first day" (1:5). This refrain echoed as the work of each day was finished, until the Creator completed all his work. The final refrain is: "God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day" (1:31).

Then God introduced a different rhythm, the rhythm of work and rest. "And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation" (2:2-3).

These rhythms of grace within the creation story give us clues for embracing and sustaining a blessed life. Like the composer of a symphony, God has woven the same rhythmic theme through his continuing creation. When we pay prayerful attention, we can hear the God-ordained rhythm all around us. Evening . . . morning. Work . . . rest. But also, inhale . . . exhale, ebb . . . flow, give . . . receive, action . . . reflection, and speech . . . silence.

Creation's rhythm is at the heart of God's life-giving gift of sabbath as well. Just as God rested after his labors, so are we to rest. "Remember the

sabbath day, and keep it holy," the fourth commandment says. "Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God" (Exodus 20:8-10).

We partially miss the point if we see sabbath keeping as only a commandment, for it is truly a gift. The God who made us knows what we need and gives it to us. God knows that we need meaningful work, so we can make a positive difference in the world. But God also knows we must periodically pause to allow God to make a difference in us. Sabbath is permission to let go—to cease our labors and accept both our work and rest as a gift.

We also partially miss the point when we limit sabbath to one day of the week, for it is an attitude that applies to living *all* our days. True, a weekly day of rest is a vital part of the divine rhythm, and the practice of dedicating a block of time each week will fine tune us to God's presence the other days. However, sabbath keeping cannot be limited by the clock or calendar. We may encounter sabbath in brief moments of prayer within a workday, or during a season when we lie dormant for weeks, silently drawing from God's deep wisdom before another period of productivity begins.

Sabbath, in each time frame, realigns us with the divine rhythm, releases our hearts from culture's stranglehold grip, and opens body and soul to God's gentle care. Keeping sabbath is an act of profound faith. We remember that we are not in charge of the world, but we rest in the arms of the One who is.

Sadly, this sabbath rhythm is almost lost in our society. Distorted assumptions about what sabbath means, the value our society places on possessions and productivity as a measure of self-worth, and our own need to be in control are eroding sabbath practices. Keeping sabbath is even, or particularly, a problem within our congregations; every church program that provides rest for some adds to the busyness for others.

Within our noisy, fast-paced, fragmented culture, we desperately attempt as individuals to fill our emptiness and generate our meaning. Most of us are exhausted, for we have taken on too much. Sabbath keeping rightly calls us to countercultural living.

Working with a public charity, Wayne Muller regularly moves between the spacious offices of wealthy donors, the crowded rooms of social service agencies, and the simple homes of poor families. "Remarkably, within this mosaic," he notes, "there is a universal refrain: *I am so busy.*" For despite their good hearts and equally good intentions, most people do not find their work light, pleasant, or healing. "Instead, as it all piles endlessly upon itself, the whole experience of being alive begins to melt into one enormous obligation" because busyness and fatigue make us unable to draw from the deep wisdom that is available.¹

“In an age that has lost its soul, Sabbath keeping offers the possibility of gaining it back,” writes Marva Dawn hopefully.² But how can we keep sabbath? At the heart of the creation story in Genesis 1, and in God’s life-giving gift of sabbath, are patterns of ebb and flow, and of repetition. These rhythms of grace recommend practices of prayer that will help us to reclaim sabbath keeping.

EBB AND FLOW

Our breathing embodies a rhythm of ebb and flow. Each time we inhale, we draw God’s life into our bodies; then we release our breath, and God takes away what our body no longer needs. Our breathing is such a common thing, yet such a miracle. In every moment of our lives, whether we notice it or not, God is breathing life into us. We draw in the fullness of life, and then we let it go, knowing that the next breath of life will be waiting for us without our earning it. Our breathing is pure grace.

“Physical breath is a very apt symbol of God’s Spirit and our spirit,” writes Tilden Edwards.³ In the biblical languages, the words for “breath” and “spirit” are the same (*ruach* in Hebrew, *pneuma* in Greek). Throughout scripture, breath is a symbol of life, from the moment God breathed life into Adam in Genesis 2:7 to the resurrection of the faithful witnesses to new life in Revelation 11:11, when “the breath of life from God entered them.”

Slow, deliberate breathing can become for us, as embodied persons, a spiritual exercise. There is a direct correlation, Edwards explains, between rapid, shallow breathing and rapid, shallow thinking. When our lives are full and our minds are racing, we breathe quickly, sometimes almost panting. At such times, the Spirit has little room to get through

to us, and we become tired and tense. Then we may unexpectedly sigh, or almost shudder, and take in a deep breath. Edwards suggests that is the wisdom of our bodies pointing the way out for us.

Here is an exercise that you may try. Pause from reading this for a moment and notice your breath. Do not attempt to control it; just allow it to go forward. Now imagine that God is breathing into you. Adjust the position of your body to sit up straight but relaxed, so that your lungs can accept their full capacity. Place both feet on the floor, with your hands

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open in your lap. Begin breathing slowly and deeply down into your diaphragm, not just into the top of your lungs as most of us do most of the time. (You may place one hand on your lower abdomen and draw your breath down into your hand so you can feel your diaphragm expanding.)

After you are feeling the ebb and flow rhythm, allow your thoughts to turn toward God in prayer. Imagine breathing in all that is of God. Then, as you exhale, imagine God taking away all that is not of God. Breathe in light . . . breathe out darkness. Breathe in peace . . . breathe out conflict. Breathe in love . . . breathe out fear. Breathe in wholeness . . . breathe out fragmentation. Breathe in rest . . . breathe out weariness.

Once you have made the connection between breathing and prayer, you will find countless ways to practice it. For example, you can breathe in God's presence and breathe out the problem that has been keeping you awake at night. You can breathe in your favorite name for God and breathe out a burden that is not yours to carry.

Or you can choose a favorite scripture and throughout the day, breathe it as a prayer. The psalms, with their parallel poetic structure, are particularly good for this. You might breathe in "The Lord is my shepherd," and breathe out "I shall not want" (Psalm 23:1). Or breathe in "Be still and know," and breathe out "that I am God" (46:10).

"Breath prayer" can be offered any time and any place; we need no additional equipment! Try it at work along with some repetitive task that you do. For example, each time you do a save or print command on the computer, breathe a prayer and your work will become easier. When a traffic light stops you on the way to a meeting, rather than curse the light for making you late, accept a sabbath opportunity. Breathe a prayer and arrive more rested at the meeting.

"Life may be brimming over with experiences, but somewhere, deep inside, all of us carry a vast and fruitful loneliness wherever we go," wrote Etty Hillesum. "And sometimes the most important thing in a whole day is the rest we take between two deep breaths, or the turning inwards in prayer for five short minutes."⁴

God's presence is literally as near as our own breathing. When we discover that, we can begin to reclaim a rhythm of sabbath rest.

REPETITION

Though each moment is new and each experience unique, the Creator clearly loves repetition. We see it in the earth's seasons, through the active growth of spring and summer followed by the necessary dormancy of fall and winter, before the next spring's new growth. The gospel promises that a similar cycle will be reflected in our bodies: in birth, life, death, and resurrection. We can depend upon this repetition within the earth's life, and it gives us confidence that life is trustworthy. "The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, his mercies never come to an end," as the writer of Lamenta-

tions proclaims, “they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness” (3:22-23).

After being bombarded with new ideas, tasks, and challenges, we will become saturated, fragmented, and exhausted. When we do not stop and ask God’s guidance, we lose the ability to discern what is most important. We are driven to accomplish everything asked of us. Carefully chosen rituals of sabbath keeping can change our emphasis and ground us in God’s economy of time. With the Spirit’s help, we can discern what most deserves our time and can learn to say “no” to what is not ours to do.

Rituals may be as simple as repeating a certain scripture each morning when we first awaken, as common as speaking a word of grace before each meal, or as quiet as a cup of tea at sunset. As elegant as the cloth-covered table with our finest dishes and fresh flowers for a weekly sabbath meal, or as rambunctious as a weekly game of basketball with a few hard-working friends. Whether it is an ancient ritual practiced by the church for centuries or one we created this morning, the point is allowing its repetition to alter our rhythm and focus.

Praying the scriptures, or *lectio divina*, is a particularly helpful practice, for it involves slowing and repetition. When we pray the scriptures, we read a passage slowly until a single verse or phrase strikes a chord in our spirits; then we stop to repeat that phrase over and over. We accept the scripture thought as God’s word to us. We reflect on it, respond to it, and rest in its truth.⁵ This practice should not replace the active study of the Bible, but it trains us to sit quietly and wait for God. When we pray this way, we trust that the same Spirit through whom the text was written will be present now and speak a fitting word to us.

REMINDERS

The coffee table in my living room is my “prayer table,” and I try to keep it as clear of clutter as possible. The table regularly calls me to sabbath rest just by its presence in my

home. At least once each day, I light the candle and pray, “I know you are present with me, Lord. Help me be present to *you*.” I sit in my “prayer chair,” offer a breath prayer, and then sometimes read or write in my journal. When that coffee table begins to pile up with clutter, I’m reminded that my sabbath keeping is slipping and my life needs some adjustments.

“I hurry on the inside. I hurry on the outside. Then I give talks on

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slowing down," writes Macrina Wiederkehr. "I would feel like an utter hypocrite but for the fact that I can talk most passionately about that which I feel the greatest lack."⁶ This confession could be my own. As committed as I am to sabbath keeping, I still find its practice very difficult.

Let us be encouraged by remembering that even our deep yearning for sabbath rest is the first step to reclaiming it. The next step is to open our lives to receive this good gift as we cease our labors and respond with gratitude to the rhythms of grace.

NOTES

1 Wayne Muller, *Sabbath: Finding Rest, Renewal, and Delight in Our Busy Lives* (New York: Bantam Books, 1999), p. 2.

2 Marva J. Dawn, *Keeping the Sabbath Wholly* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1989), p. 50.

3 Tilden Edwards, *Living in the Presence: Spiritual Exercises to Open Our Lives to the Awareness of God* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1987), p. 21.

4 Etty Hillesum, *An Interrupted Life, The Diaries 1941-1943, and Letters from Westerbork* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1996), p. 93.

5 Among the helpful sources to learn about this way of praying, I suggest M. Basil Pennington's *Lectio Divina: Renewing the Ancient Practice of Praying the Scriptures* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Co., 1998).

6 Macrina Wiederkehr, *A Tree Full of Angels: Seeing the Holy in the Ordinary* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1988), p. 110.



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