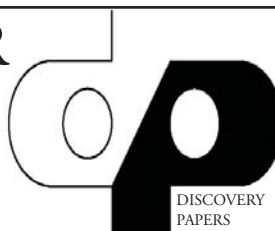


WHAT DOES IT MATTER IF I TAKE A BREAK?

SERIES: WEEPING IN WORSHIP



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Jeremiah 17:19-27
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Recently, every morning that I drive my kids to school, they ask me to play a particular song in the car. It's not a kids' song, it's not Veggie Tales or anything like that. It's by an indie band that I like called CAKE and the song is called *No Phone*. The words tell of a day without your cell phone. They repeat over and over again, "No phone, no phone, I just want to be alone today." Why do they like this song? Is it just because it's funny and has a nice beat? Do they just like silly songs? Maybe. Or having witnessed a world around them where cell phones distract their parents, their friend's parents and other people they know, are they drawn to something about the idea of a day with "no phone"?

There's a group of Jewish artists that have formed a non-profit organization that they call "Reboot." Their goal is to reboot the traditional Jewish practices and traditions into modern life. As part of that effort, they've formed a special group called the Sabbath Manifesto. These people are advocating one day per week to be unplugged. Unplug from your phone, computer, TV, and video games. Unplug from all those things that take us away from the present and engage with the people we're around. A few weeks ago, they organized a National Day of Unplugging, where they encouraged people across the country to unplug together. What began as a Jewish movement has become a secular effort to get people away from the technology that dominates our modern experience.

A few weeks ago, a woman named Judith Shulevitz was interviewed on NPR. She wrote a book that came out in March called *The Sabbath World*. In it, she talks about her traditional Jewish childhood memories of the Sabbath. She traces her own experience of the Sabbath and follows many other traditions as well, eventually ending up with a mixture of fondness and ambivalence to the idea of Sabbath.

Why are people in our world talking about Sabbath? Why are an indie modern rock band from Sacramento, a group of Jewish artists, and a literary critic from New York talking about the same theme? What is it that our world is recognizing as a need? Do we see it? Are we talking about it too? Should we be? Does it really matter if we take a break in our lives? What does resting have to do with God? Why would God care if I rest or not? After all, a lot of what we hear from the Bible is what God wants us to do for Him right? As I look around my world, there is so much need out there. How can I possibly rest? What does it matter if I take a break?

This morning is the first of four weeks that will complete a sixteen week series in the book of Jeremiah. If you've missed the earlier parts of this series, they are all available online in audio and text form (www.pbc.org/messages). If you remember the context of Jeremiah, he is a prophet in the city of Jerusalem just before the city is destroyed by the Babylonians and God's people are carried off into exile. His preaching warns God's people of the unthinkable disaster that is about to befall them. We get to see Jeremiah's pain in delivering this message: we see him weeping, but we see all of this in the context of his faithfulness to God. We see him weeping in worship.

So this morning we are going to look at Jeremiah 17:19-27. What we'll see here is one of the more difficult messages that God gave Jeremiah to deliver. First we'll see how God speaks through Jeremiah.

Then we'll look at the specific message that God gives Jeremiah and we'll find out why so many people, even today, are talking about Sabbath. Then we'll find out something surprising about what happens when God's command is ignored. So let's find out whether it matters at all if we take a break.

Receive the Interruption of Scripture

These first few verses of our passage basically introduce the message that Jeremiah is about to give.

Jeremiah 17:19-20

This is what the LORD said to me: "Go and stand at the gate of the people, through which the kings of Judah go in and out; stand also at all the other gates of Jerusalem. Say to them, 'Hear the word of the LORD, O kings of Judah and all people of Judah and everyone living in Jerusalem who come through these gates.'"

God gives Jeremiah instructions to deliver a message to His people. He tells him to go stand at the gate of the people and then to go to all the other gates. God tells Jeremiah to start out his message with a very important word to Jewish ears. Hear. This is the Hebrew word, *Shema*, but this isn't just any word in Hebrew. This is the word that begins the most important phrase in Deuteronomy 6:4 of the Old Testament, "Hear, O Israel, the Lord Thy God is One." In fact, Jews refer to this prayer as the *Shema* and it's one of the most defining prayers of Jewish life. In my Hebrew class in seminary we memorized this prayer in Hebrew and recited it at the beginning of every class, *Sh'ma Yis'ra'el Adonai Eloheinu Adonai echad*. Incidentally, if you ever get the chance to hear Hebrew recited with a Texas drawl, I highly recommend it.

So God tells Jeremiah to go stand in the city gates. People are walking around, doing their business, going from here to there and Jeremiah starts talking by saying, *Shema*. "Listen, this is what God has to say to you!" So these Jewish people stopped and listened. Whatever they were doing, they stopped at the sound of that word and they listened to this guy who claimed to speak for YHWH, their God. Their lives were interrupted by the word of God and this is how we should receive this passage as well. Our lives are interrupted by the Word of God this morning. Receive God's interruption.

Imagine you're in the middle of doing something that you find really important. You're watching a game, cooking a meal, working on a craft project, taking a nap, or reading a book. You're doing something that demands a lot of attention and then the phone rings. Most of us have caller ID these days, so you look at your phone to see who it is. Now you have a decision to make: Do you take the call? Now depending on the number, that could be an easy decision. There are some people from whom you'd never take the call and then others from whom you'd always take the call. You're always faced with a decision of what to do with this interruption?

Now I don't know what your situation is today. What your plans are for the afternoon. What's on your weekly to-do list or if you're

dealing with a crisis. I don't know where you are right now. Jeremiah didn't know what these people were doing as they walked past these gates. He didn't know what errands they were on or what tasks pre-occupied them. Jeremiah's goal, God's goal, was to interrupt them with something important. So this morning, I encourage you to receive this interruption of Scripture. Look for what God has for you in this passage from Jeremiah. I think today's passage is particularly relevant for us: in this time and place. Receive this interruption of Scripture. It may just change your life.

Remember God's Sovereignty

So God's Word through Jeremiah interrupts these people. But what does He say? What is the content of this message?

Jeremiah 17:21-23

'This is what the LORD says: Be careful not to carry a load on the Sabbath day or bring it through the gates of Jerusalem. Do not bring a load out of your houses or do any work on the Sabbath, but keep the Sabbath day holy, as I commanded your forefathers. Yet they did not listen or pay attention; they were stiff-necked and would not listen or respond to discipline.'

The message that God gives Jeremiah has to do with the Sabbath. We realize that God didn't send Jeremiah to the city gates just because it was a good place to find people. It's more than that. The message itself has to do with what you do at the city gates. And what is that? Well, it's what you do when you leave your house: you run errands, go here, go there, do this, do that. If you lived in the city of Jerusalem, you might go outside of the city to interact with the villagers outside the city. If you lived in the villages, you might come into the city to go to market. Either way, you walked through the gates carrying something—doing your business. You're working.

So Jeremiah reminds them of one of the basic commands given by God to the Jewish people: one day out of every seven, you are supposed to stop working. You're not supposed to carry a load, you're not supposed to run errands, you're not supposed to do any type of work, but you are to set apart the seventh day of the week. Make it holy. The basic meaning of that word just means "to set it apart." Make it different, special. Don't do what you do all the other days on that day. So for the Jews, the Sabbath is to be, above all other things, a special day.

Shulevitz, who wrote *The Sabbath World* points this out,

The Sabbath, said the rabbis, is a bride given by God to her groom, the people of Israel. Once a week they go forth in wedding clothes to marry her ... The Sabbath, said the rabbis, is the Temple in time rather than space. Once a week, every Jew becomes a priest and enters it. (Introduction, xvi)

The Sabbath was supposed to be a special day. That's not so much the case anymore, but this country used to be powerfully affected by the Sabbath. Most states used to have what they called "Blue Laws" that prohibited certain business activities on Sundays. I remember as a kid this meant that car dealerships had to be closed on Sundays. What this meant to us is that whenever we needed a new car, Sunday was the day to start looking. We would park on the street and walk around the car lot without worrying about a car salesman tracking us down and giving us his sales spiel. Is this why God told His people to honor the Sabbath, so at least one day of the week you could shop for cars without being attacked by aggressive car salesmen?

Well, no, it's not. Two years ago I preached a whole series on the meaning of Sabbath entitled *Remember To Rest: Rest To Remember*. We saw that the Sabbath proclaimed something about these odd Jewish people. In an agrarian culture, where taking care of the land and living off of its produce is what everyone does, resting for one day out of seven doesn't make good business sense. If you're a farmer, there's always work to be done. Weeds and pests don't take Sunday off, but these people called Israel were instructed to take one day off to make a point. Every culture around them did everything they could to control their environment. They worked hard to make the land fruitful; they carved statues and prayed to them asking for rain; they sacrificed valuable things in order to make their gods happy, but they didn't take a day off.

The God of Israel was different. His people knew that He loved them and chose them. They knew, or should have known, that their fruitfulness as farmers depended on Him and His character, not on their efforts. He wanted them to remember that so He gave them one day per week to acknowledge that their efforts don't guarantee success, but their relationship with Him does. They can't control their environment. They can't bring rain. They can't grow crops. Only God can and when His people realize that, it brings great freedom.

Matitahu Tsevat has written one of the definitive works on understanding the Sabbath, and he says this,

Man normally is master of his time. He is free to dispose of it as he sees fit or as necessity bids him. The Israelite is duty-bound, however, once every seven days to assert by word and deed that God is the master of time ... Every seventh day the Israelite renounces his autonomy and affirms God's dominion over him. (Tsevat, *The Meaning of the Book of Job and Other Biblical Studies*, "The Basic Meaning of the Biblical Sabbath," 48)

So God tells His people to rest as a way to remember Him. To remember who they are and whose they are. They needed to remember their dependence on God.

So what about us? Where do we fit in, living in this time and place? The basic way that we, as followers of God after the ministry Christ, relate to the Old Testament law is to look at the principle behind it and see how that principle translates into our own experience. I don't think twice about wearing a shirt made from two different fabrics, but I do think twice about killing my neighbor because the principle still applies.

What about Sabbath? If Sabbath is about renouncing autonomy and affirming God's dominion, does that principle still apply? Is that something we need? Asking that question is like walking into an unemployment office asking if anyone needs a job.

Look at us! Look at how much time we spend trying to control our environment: working to make money; managing our time; controlling our children; protecting our future; making our lives look the way we want them to look. Do we need a break from our autonomy? Do we need to be reminded that we aren't really in charge?

Yes, yes, and more yes. This is a message that speaks right into the heart of our culture. We are obsessed with our autonomy. We are convinced that we can do anything we want. We need to be reminded of God's dominion over us. We need the Sabbath. Sabbath isn't about rest; it's about control and we love to control things. So Jeremiah's reminder to the Jews in Jerusalem becomes an invitation to us. Stop trying to control everything. Admit God's dominion; rest; take a break;

remember God's sovereignty.

Think about it this way. Think about how many of us will admit to being "control freaks" and we all kind of nod our heads and laugh. Now think about if someone admitted to being a sex addict, an alcoholic, a compulsive liar, or a petty thief. We wouldn't laugh that off. Why do we treat being addicted to our own autonomy and disregarding God's role in our lives as less severe than stealing a pack of gum?

Walter Brueggeman has this to say about the Jews in reference to this passage in Jeremiah,

"We have seen that self-reliance is a central pathology of this people. Sabbath fidelity is one surrender of such self-reliance." (Jeremiah, 167)

Is this true of us? Is self-reliance a central pathology of this people gathered here at PBC this morning? Or to put it more simply, do we think we're all that? That we can control our lives? Make things happen? Be independent and successful?

This is where our faith in a God who created us and His Son who saves us gets real. One of the things I love about working with young people is that they like dramatic ways to live out their faith. They want faith to make a difference. They want to do big things and experience God in big ways, dramatic ways. For most of us, really taking one day off a week would be an incredibly dramatic way of proclaiming our dependence on God to the world.

Remember, though, that Sabbath isn't fundamentally about rest. Jeremiah isn't trying to get people to take a vacation, work less hard, or be less busy. Those are good things too, but Sabbath is about something deeper. I just returned yesterday from a week on vacation and I realized that a vacation is a completely different thing than a Sabbath. Now, taking vacations is a great thing and I definitely recommend it, but Sabbath is not about a vacation. It's about remembering that you, that we, are dependent on God. We need to remember who we are in relation to God.

What would that look like for you? Is there some type of rhythm you can build into your life to help you remember God's sovereignty? Maybe it's not a 24 hour period, but what is it that reminds you of God's dominion over you? A good start is to think about the ways you normally exercise control: your time; your money; your resources; your home; your relationships. How might you interrupt your normal manner of exercising control in order to remember that God is in control? An interruption that is a way of declaring that this God you believe in is real; that He is God and you are not. What might it look like for you to stop carrying loads, stop working, and keeping a Sabbath holy? How can you remember God's sovereignty?

Recognize God's Reminders

Our passage starts with the people of Jerusalem going about their lives around the gates of the city. Then Jeremiah steps in and interrupts them with an inconvenient word from God. The message is that they need to remember the Sabbath and in the last part of this message, Jeremiah explains to them the consequences behind obeying or not obeying that command.

Jeremiah 17:24-27

'But if you are careful to obey me, declares the LORD, and bring no load through the gates of this city on the Sabbath, but keep the Sabbath day holy by not doing

any work on it, then kings who sit on David's throne will come through the gates of this city with their officials. They and their officials will come riding in chariots and on horses, accompanied by the men of Judah and those living in Jerusalem, and this city will be inhabited forever. People will come from the towns of Judah and the villages around Jerusalem, from the territory of Benjamin and the western foothills, from the hill country and the Negev, bringing burnt offerings and sacrifices, grain offerings, incense and thank offerings to the house of the LORD. But if you do not obey me to keep the Sabbath day holy by not carrying any load as you come through the gates of Jerusalem on the Sabbath day, then I will kindle an unquenchable fire in the gates of Jerusalem that will consume her fortresses.'"

It turns out that the implications of honoring or not honoring the Sabbath are pretty significant. God starts out by saying that if you honor the Sabbath, if you are careful to obey me and keep the Sabbath holy, then things will be pretty good. The description of what life will be like for a people who honors the Sabbath in verses 25-26 is the definition of "the good life" for ancient Israel. Kings in the line of David will reign in the Holy City. God's land will be populated with lots of people and they will enjoy a rich life of deep and meaningful worship. The basic point is that keeping the Sabbath leads to the good life. Sabbath leads to success.

Jeremiah also says that honoring the Sabbath leads to life and then he shocks us by saying that if God's people forget about the Sabbath, the consequences will be drastic. So drastic that if they don't stop carrying loads through these gates, on the one day per week that they aren't supposed to, he'll eliminate the gates altogether. Jeremiah reveals the irony in God's sense of justice. If His people disobey Him by walking through gates, He'll burn up those very same gates with an unquenchable fire.

Now this should seem a bit surprising to us. God, through Jeremiah, is giving a reason for the worst national disaster to strike God's people up to this point. The reason why Jerusalem, the Holy City of God's people will be destroyed, transported off the land that was promised to them, forced to live in a foreign land under pagan leaders is because ... the people didn't take a break. The reason why the Temple of God, which was built by Solomon to the glory of God, displayed the greatness of YHWH to the world, manifested God's presence, was the centerpiece of Jewish religious practice, was the only place you could offer a sacrifice, and was the monument to God's greatness was going to be destroyed because ... the people didn't take a break. The reason that this place will be devastated, torn to the ground, plundered, and robbed of its wealth is because ... the people didn't take a break. They didn't rest.

Does this seem fair? Does this make sense? That the destruction of Jerusalem is because the Jews forgot to take a break? I mean, God's people did a lot of stuff wrong in the 400 years before the exile. They engaged in deviant sexual behavior, they oppressed the poor people in their land, they ignored God, and they worshipped other gods. All of this and here God says that because they didn't take a break, they would be sent into exile. To be sure, other places in Scripture link the exile with the general sinfulness of the people, but this passage links it uniquely to Israel's failure to honor the Sabbath. That's remarkable!

Unless you think of it this way, God told His people to rest as a way of remembering Him. They didn't, so God made them rest. In fact, that's essentially what Scripture says. In addition to one day out of every seven being a Sabbath, God said that one year out of every

seven, the land was supposed to enjoy a Sabbath and not be farmed. To our knowledge Israel never honored this command. So God said that Israel was going to go away from their land for seventy years to make up for the seventy Sabbaths that the land missed.

2 Chronicles 36:21

The land enjoyed its sabbath rests; all the time of its desolation it rested, until the seventy years were completed in fulfillment of the word of the LORD spoken by Jeremiah.

God told His people to let the land rest as a way to remember Him. They didn't, so God gave the land His rest. God told His people to rest as a way to remember Him. They didn't, so God made them rest in exile. The exile, for God's people, is a kind of forced Sabbath.

When my son was an infant, he often had a hard time falling asleep. He would frequently wake up in the middle of the night screaming. He was not able to fall back asleep and there wasn't much we could do, but I found a trick that worked about half of the time. He'd be crying and squirming around and I'd try to hold him tightly so that he couldn't move. When I held him like that, he started to scream louder and fight harder, but then after about twenty seconds, he'd just fall asleep. He'd go from squirming, fighting, and crying to suddenly falling right asleep. After a few minutes, I could loosen my grip and set him down in his crib. You see, he wanted to fall asleep. He was desperately tired. He just couldn't do it. I'd hold him so that there was no way he could move, no way he could rile himself up and then he'd suddenly fall asleep from exhaustion.

That's what God does here. He forces His people to rest. My suggestion to us this morning is that He doesn't necessarily force us to rest in the same way, but He gives us reminders of our need to depend on Him. What do you think that crick in your neck is? What's that feeling of being overwhelmed all about? Why do things never seem to work out just like you want them to at work? Quite often, we fight against God's reminders. Just like the Jews were fighting against the idea that they were about to go into exile. But there is another option. We can recognize God's reminders and we can rest in Him.

For the season of lent, my family experimented with something that we are going to try to continue. It's pretty similar to what the people at Reboot are doing. We're trying to take one day per week and turn off everything: no email, no computer, no TV, and no video games. We're trying to do something during that time that reminds us of God. A brief, little family worship service of sorts. It's got to be brief with little kids.

My experience with this has been really interesting. Just before it starts I usually have a mild panic attack. I think about all the emails I need to send before it starts. I run around frantically and I'm terrified of being bored out of my mind for 24 hours. That panic usually lasts for the first third then I relax. Because I can't use my computer or turn on the TV, I go outside, plan a hike, go for a bike ride, walk around the block, or play a board game. I start to really enjoy it and I settle into it. As the rabbis used to say, I receive that time as a gift from God, then it ends, and I check my email to see what I missed. Life goes on.

I recognize my extreme discomfort entering into our family Sabbath as a reminder of how much I need it. I don't like to be dependent and I don't like to trust God. It makes me want to fall to the ground and throw a tantrum. I don't like it when I get overwhelmed. I don't like it when I get tired and can't get everything done on my list. I don't like it when I get sick just at the point when I have the most work to do. So I can fight against those things or I can take them as reminders that I am ultimately dependent on God and in my better times, I can listen to those reminders and rest.

So what are God's reminders to you? Can you see them as reminders? Can you see past the pain of the destruction of the holy city and see God inviting you to remember Him? Can you see the God who loves you trying to bring you back to Him? God will remind His people. How is He reminding you?

Conclusion

Our lives have been interrupted this morning. Your coming here to worship this morning is itself an interruption into the regular work that you do. Just being here is something apart from your regular life and we started out by seeing how the word of God that came through Jeremiah was an interruption to God's people.

The people in our world are talking about Sabbath because they've observed that rest seems to be an important rhythm for the human species. Sabbath, however, is about more than rest. It is not about recharging or balancing your life. Sabbath is about God. It's about the One who created us, loves us, and redeems us. Rest by itself is helpful, but rest that reminds you of God is what we really need.

So find a way to make that real for you. Maybe it's actually taking a weekly Sabbath. Maybe it's half a day. Maybe it has to do with your money. Maybe it has to do with your home. Maybe it's something entirely different, but look for a way to remind yourself of your dependence on God.

Recognize the ways that God might be reminding you in His own way. He doesn't seem to have the same fear of pain that we do. He's willing to destroy Jerusalem because people forgot to rest. He seems willing to allow His people to experience some terrifying things for the purpose of knowing Him better. We can recognize the things in our lives that often seem to us to be inconvenient interruptions — sickness, tragedy, crisis, and pain — as reminders of our need to depend on God. We can allow them to bring us back to Him and we can receive those interruptions. We can remember God's sovereignty and we can recognize His reminders.

Now we can do what God ultimately wants us to do. Not work harder or try more. Not be better or stop sinning. We can rest. Rest in Him. Take a break. Enjoy a Sabbath. It's been a long week. You've been trying so hard to make life work. God's reminder to you is that He is the One in charge and you need to rest.