

## **Sabbath Meditation**

March 13, 2020

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“What is the way to the woods, how do you go there?  
By climbing up through the six days’ field,  
kept in all the body’s years, the body’s  
sorrow, weariness, and joy. By passing through  
The narrow gate on the far side of that field...

To come in among these trees you must leave behind  
The six days’ world, all of it, all of its plans and hopes.  
You must come without weapon or tool, alone,  
Expecting nothing, remembering nothing,  
Into the ease of sight, the brotherhood of eye and leaf.”

Let me tell you about my time in the woods. A simple time. An unspectacular time. I got to the woods by driving up to Northern Pines Camp. I arrived after a week of stomach flu followed by a week of catching up on work. I brought work with me. I was tired that weekend, and not feeling great. But I had asked Mike to put my snowshoes in the car... and felt like I should make use of them. So Sunday afternoon I strapped on my snowshoes and headed out the back door.

At first, I stuck to my usual paths. I checked on Betty’s tree--the white pine we planted in honor of Mike’s mom, and then followed the road down the hill and along the lakeshore. I greeted Wesley, one of the dogs in camp, but didn’t wait to speak to his family. Then I headed up into the woods following a well-established hiking and skiing trail. At this point, the trees began to work their magic. I was caught up in the ordinary extraordinary beauty of the woods in winter. I took in the view from the ridge above the lake, and took off my gloves to touch fraying rolls of birch bark. I sniffed the air, reveling in the crispness.

it came to me out of the blue--there was no reason for me to stay on the path! For i could see a long way through the winter woods to my eventual destination back in camp. And my snowshoes were well-designed to handle the terrain. I took off as the crow flies, and then purposely meandered through the woods, following here a deer track, there a fallen log. Experiencing time and eternity in the same day.

Beautiful.

But what is the place of sabbath when the covid-19 pandemic has upended our lives? When we are uncertain about the best way to care for our loved ones- and the stakes are high. When we are anxious about changes at work and school. When we are forced to re-adjust our plans every few hours, constantly re-evaluating and second-guessing ourselves and our leaders. When we find ourselves checking social media constantly to see how others are handling these challenges. Is Sabbath relevant?

Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann argues that Sabbath is at the heart of the gospel. The God who says, "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery" is also the God who says, "Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy" and then says "you shall not bear false witness against your neighbor...[and] you shall not covet...anything that belongs to your neighbor." Sabbath is an act of resistance to the God of Pharaoh who would have us making bricks for his pyramids. Sabbath is an act of resistance against a market economy that sees us as valuable only for what we produce, an economy that puts us in competition with our neighbor. Brueggemann says that this odd command to remember the sabbath day is what allows us to shift from "anxious productivity" to "committed neighborliness." God brought the people out of slavery in Egypt and commanded them to remember the sabbath- not as an arbitrary command, but for the purpose of forming a new community - a community focused on love of God and neighbor.

My walk in the woods probably did not change me in any way that was immediately apparent to the people around me. But I do believe it loosened the grip of my compulsive need to get through my checklist. It created just a tad more space and time for the practice of being neighborly.

Sabbath does this. It reorients us to what is most meaningful, most satisfying. The living water. The bread of life. It brings us back to neighborliness: kindness and compassion for our human and non-human neighbors. And this is good news, today and always.