

Sermon for Ash Wednesday
February 26, 2020
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Journeying the Way of Love through Lent - Rest

Upon the completion of a three-year mission service term in Kolkata, India, I found myself back at a friends' house in the Southern Alps of New Zealand (I believe this place should be on everyone's travel bucket list). I had gone back to NZ because I was in much need of rest to restore my weary body and soul. One day I was wearing a t-shirt that had the iconic image of Snoopy laying on his back, but instead of laying on that beloved red doghouse, Snoopy was laying on top of planet earth. The caption below the image read "Save the Planet."



read "Save the Planet." I loved this shirt. Not only was it extremely comfortable but it expressed my desire to be an activist of sorts, changing the world for the better.

When I came into the kitchen for breakfast one morning where my beloved shirt, Andrew, my Kiwi friend and mentor, noticed the words printed on the shirt and asked: "Do you believe that shirt? Do you believe that it's your job to save the world?"

I paused. Was this a trick question? I wanted to answer with a loud, "YES! Of course!" but I could tell that was not the answer he was looking for. So for the first time I paused and thought about what was my role in the process of transforming the world for the better. I didn't know how to respond.

Noticing the silence as I struggled to find an answer, Andrew asked a followup question: "Don't you believe that Jesus already did the saving? It's God's role to bring it to a completion, not yours."

I knew Andrew was a man who devoted much of his time to serve both people and creation, so I knew that he believed that his acts of justice and mercy were central to his being and faith. Therefore, initially I was surprised by his line of questions. But as I let what he was saying settle in, I realized the truth that he was speaking: God is in control. God does the saving work. We get to participate in it. But at the end of the day, the weight is not meant to be carried on our shoulders.

I needed to hear that at that time. I was carrying so much weight from what I had left unfinished in Kolkata. Andrew's words reminded me that those heavy burdens were being carried by God, whether or not I was in Kolkata, and that it was okay for me to pause, rest, and find restoration in the hands of God. Discovering Rest, knowing that God is God and I am not, that God is Savior and I am not, was paramount for me at that time.



Today, Ash Wednesday, we bear the physical reminder that we were created from the dust of the earth, and to it, our mortal bodies will return. While we have life eternal through Jesus Christ, we are mere mortals, not gods.

Many, if not most, of us live our lives pretending that we are gods, whether we recognize it or not. We try to maintain as much power and control as we can. We feel the pressure, believing that if we stop for a moment, even just a second, the house of cards, which we so carefully constructed, will fall into a million pieces. Even our mantras are focused towards this lifestyle: For example: "God helps those who help themselves" and "Pull yourself up by your own bootstraps" are phrases that say that we hold all of the power in our own hands to determine the progress of our lives.

Independence has become our idol.

Even still, in our heads and in our hearts, we know we are not God. But we need regular reminders of this. So please repeat after me, "I am not god". I AM NOT GOD. (Thank God, I am not God. If I was, we'd all be in BIG trouble!)

Whether it is in the form of weekly sabbath, a ten-minute deep breathing or centering prayer exercise, daily coffee breaks sans phone or computer, or a monthly retreats, the act of rest, not only restores our physical bodies, but also restores our relationship with God. Rest is a practice that reminds us that God is in control. That the world WILL keep spinning if we hit pause.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel writes of Sabbath saying:

He who wants to enter the holiness of the day must first lay down the profanity of clattering commerce, of being yoked to toil. He must go away from the screech of dissonant days, from the nervousness and fury of acquisitive-ness and the betrayal in embezzling his own life. He must say farewell to manual work and learn to understand that the world has already been created and will survive without the help of man. Six days a week we wrestle with the world, wringing profit from the earth; on the Sabbath we especially care for the seed of eternity planted in the soul. The world has our hands, but our soul belongs to Someone Else.

Six days a week we seek to dominate the world, on the seventh day we try to dominate the self.¹

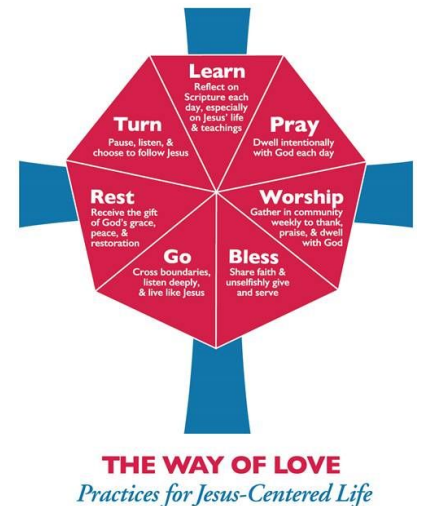
While Heschel speaks specifically of Sabbath as the weekly day of rest, I believe his words can apply to the human need to find rest in various rhythms: whether daily, weekly, monthly, or annually. Rest allows us to take a break from trying to be gods and reminds us that God is God.

During the Lenten season, people often pick up practices, like fasting or abstaining from certain foods or drinks, with the intention of drawing closer to God as we prepare our hearts and our minds for the coming Holy Week and Easter. For many these practices are helpful, but for some, it is just another item to add to our *To Do* list. It is one more thing that we can accomplish, one more thing to busy ourselves with, one more thing that feeds the illusion of control. The practice of rest can help counter these pitfalls.

Throughout Lent we will explore the seven practices of *The Way of Love* as offered to us by our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry and the Episcopal Church. Today we start with the practice of Rest, because I believe that all other practices will begin and end with Rest. It is from a place of rest, and a place of assurance that God is God (and we are not), that we can then enter into the other six practices.

As we journey on the Way of Love through Lent, remember that we are but dust, but God is God.

We can slow down, breath, hit the pause button, power off the phone, unplug, and rest in the arms of God.



¹ Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel *The Sabbath: Its meaning for modern man*, Farrar, Staus and Giroux: New York, 1979, 14.