I am inescapably a creature of habit. My weekly practice is to write and revise upcoming sermons on Monday mornings. I love Monday mornings. Just me, a large table in a quiet café, a hot cup of coffee, and the sacred task of meditating on scripture and crafting words to share with you. It is a tremendous gift and one that I do not take for granted. Often, I begin those Monday mornings by catching up on all the wonderful reading material that I have collected over the past week. A quick glance at some favorite websites for inspiration and I’m off to the Biblical commentaries. A few weeks ago, however, I found inspiration in an unlikely place—the opinion pages of the New York Times. It was there that I encountered a column with the title, “Remember the Sabbath Day.” Eureka! The author is Margaret Renkl, who tells the story of an encounter with her grandmother, a devout Baptist living in Lower Alabama. It was a Sunday afternoon, the author was maybe ten years old, and she was looking for help with a sewing project. She knocked on her grandmother’s open door and found her sitting in a chair under the window, her Bible open in her lap. When Margaret asked Grandmother Ollie for help, the response was firm but kind: “Not today, honey. The Lord tells us not to work on the Sabbath.”

Renkl’s reflection on the ways in which the rhythm of God-centered rest shaped her grandmother’s life is poignant, moving, inspiration, convicting. And utterly unattainable for me. My name is Chris, and I am a Sabbath-breaker. I trust that I am among friends in that regard. Like many of you, I have my excuses for this. I can tick them off one-by-one, constructing an airtight argument for the necessity of my work, the demands of my life, and the impossibility of rest. Like many of you, a full day of Sabbath feels like a luxury I can’t afford, or like a horizon that always remains just out of reach. Maybe next week. Or next month. Or next year.

Margaret Renkl is one of us as well—she describes at length her struggle with regular practices of Sabbath. Then she describes picking up her grandmother’s Bible and turning to the words we’ve just heard from the Book of Deuteronomy. She writes, “Reading those verses again made me wonder: What if resting, all by itself, is the real act of holiness? What if honoring the gift of our only life in this gorgeous world means taking time every week to slow down?”

My sense is that she’s on to something. Sabbath is rooted in the conviction that there is a holy rhythm to life in this world. When we spend just one hour a week tuning in to the spiritual realm, it has a lasting impact. Anne Lamott writes “I do not at all understand the mystery of grace–only that it meets us where we are but does not leave us where it found us.” Sabbath is that place where we slow down long enough to allow this grace to catch up to us. It can happen anywhere and anytime, but true Sabbath never leaves us unchanged.

You may wonder why a sermon on the practice of holy rest is a part of a series on Belonging. Here’s the answer. Sabbath is a regular reminder that all the things that occupy our time do not get to own us. We belong to God—to nothing and no one else. Separating ourselves from the rush of life reorients us to that reality.

The brief verses we heard from Mark this morning constitute a “before and after” of one of Jesus’ most memorable miracles. After Jesus orders his disciples to go away to a deserted place and rest, Mark writes, “Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. As he went ashore, he saw a
great crowd.” What follows is the miraculous feeding of five thousand hungry people, hardly a break in Jesus’ busy schedule. But I am most interested this morning in the short verses that follow that dramatic event. Jesus puts his disciples in the boat and sends them away, he dismisses the crowd, and he goes up the mountain to pray.

I think these succinctly summarized actions of Jesus might provide a clue to understanding the practice of Sabbath and how it roots us in God’s presence. We don’t know which day it was, we don’t how long Jesus spent on the mountaintop. All we know is that Jesus dismisses the crowd, goes up the mountain, and prays. What if we were to adopt these simple actions as our weekly practice?

First, he dismissed the crowd. Not many of us have to worry about hordes of needy people or bands of disciples following us everywhere we go. For us, I think the crowd might be the cloud—the overabundance of information and engagement that we carry with us, best represented by the ubiquitous accessibility afforded by technology. Everywhere we go, we take a crowd. A few years ago, back in Atlanta, Sara and I were going out to dinner one night, taking the MARTA train into downtown. We had gone through the gate and were standing on the platform waiting for our train when I made a disconcerting discovery. I had left my iPhone on the dresser in our bedroom. I looked at Sara, explained the emergency situation, and told her I needed to run back to the house. Calmly but assertively, Sara responded that this was not necessary. We would only be gone for a few hours and everything would be okay. Just short of panic by this point, I attempted the ultimate pastoral secret weapon, “But what if someone dies?” I recognized the foolishness of these words as soon as they came out. What was I going to do to prevent this? What could possibly happen that couldn’t be responded to a few hours later? And yet, I think my fear of leaving the phone at home is not a purely personal neurosis. I’m not going to ask for a show of hands, but I do wonder how many of you have a silenced device close at hand. With it, you will know the latest headlines from the Middle East, newsworthy tweets, the current activities of your friends and family (who is at brunch where), the scores of any sporting events, and whether anyone wants to be in touch with you by phone, text, Snapchat, or Facebook message. Dismissing the crowd might be our most challenging task in practicing Sabbath. Turn off the screen. Leave the phone at home. Trust the world can keep spinning without your keeping tabs. And, if you are able to do this, tell me how!

Next, Jesus went up the mountain. Now, as one who feels the presence of God most in high altitudes, I do think we can take this one literally and be better off for it. But in the flatlands, I would invite us to think of the mountain as any place (literal or figurative) away from the rigors of routine that dominate our daily lives. Climbing the mountain might mean sitting on the porch or floating in the pool, or visiting a friend or going to the gym or reading a novel or taking a bath. The point is that we get some separation between ourselves and so-called normal life. In his classic book, The Sabbath Jewish theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel explains that the first holy thing in all of creation was not a people or a place but a day. Heschel writes, “God made everything in creation and called it good, but when God rested on the seventh day, God called it holy.” Heschel imagines Sabbath as a “palace in time,” into which human beings are invited every single week of our lives. I love that image. Your palace in time might be this beautiful worship space, but it could also be a coffee shop or a path through the words. The point is the same—find a place set apart and go there regularly.

Finally, Jesus prays. This is an important reminder that Sabbath is not only rest; it is also worship. The demand of Moses to Pharaoh...let my people go...was rooted in a desire for rest and a need for worship. Regular concrete practices of rest in God’s presence, to be simply and joyfully at home with God. To be together. To be apart. This is one of the reasons why we come to worship each Sunday; for a weekly ritual in which we are reminded of what truly matters in our lives. We slow down. We read holy words and we sing sacred songs. We pause in soulful silence and join in
communal prayers. We confess that we cannot save ourselves and we cannot rescue the world—we are creatures and not the creator. We accept a gift that we did not create and cannot earn by our own effort—the gift of sacred rest. The gift of belonging to God frees us from relentless striving and self-criticism. This week, contemplating the power of All Saints Sunday, I read a beautiful piece written by a nurse who has spent years caring for the dying. With wisdom and wit, she recounts the regrets she has heard voiced by those who are nearing the end of this chapter of the journey. Every single one of them calls us back to the power of belonging. The most common regrets? I wish I'd had the courage to live a life true to myself not the life others expected of me. I wish I didn't work so hard. I wish I had stayed in touch with my friends and family. You see, in the end, this is the room where it happens—where we hear the truth about ourselves, where we let go of our obsession with being productive; where we connect with our siblings in Christ and friends, new and old. Sabbath is the cure for what ails us.

For over twenty years, the poet and farmer Wendell Berry spent his Sunday mornings outdoors; walking, meditating, and writing. The result was a collection of Sabbath poems, which he titled “A Timbered Choir.” Some of my favorite lines are these, written in the dog days of late summer:

Harvest will fill the barn; for that
The hand must ache, the face must sweat.

And yet no leaf or grain is filled
By work of ours; the field is tilled
And left to grace. That we may reap,
Great work is done while we’re asleep.iii

Here is my pastoral challenge to you as harvest-time signals the lengthening darkness: rest in God and allow God to rest in you. Trust that God can handle being God without your help. Know that you are loved enough to deserve a break, even a nap. Dismiss the crowds. Climb the mountain. Pray. Keep the flames of faith alive. Keep God in the center of your life. Keep the Sabbath holy…and wholly. Amen.

i Anne Lamott, Traveling Mercies, p. 143.
