

Sabbath
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Last Sunday in worship, Ginny Sassaman spoke about the power of mindfulness to foster deeper compassion and resilience in each of us. As an extension of that invitation to reflection and spiritual practice, today we will be exploring sabbath and time. Abraham Joshua Heschel, the vital 20th-century Jewish theologian wrote about the practice and theology of sabbath. As we heard in our reading, Heschel reminds us that what was sanctified, made holy or *kadosh*, first in Jewish scripture was time--the day on which God rested in the culmination of the creation story at the beginning of the book of Genesis and the Torah. "And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy." First time, then people, then place.

Sabbath is a time of holy rest, intentional rest, rest honoring spirit. In many religious traditions a formal sabbath day is filled with spiritual practices like worship and prayer, and community, family, and food. Sabbath is an opportunity to turn both inward for reflection, and outward to connect with what we call holy and with community. As with any spiritual practice, Sabbath requires intention and attention, or it is something else. In a time of pandemic, political turmoil, and justice-seeking, things are topsy-turvy. Our feelings, routines, and really everything have been turned upside down, and are likely so different than just five months ago. Some folks are thriving in quarantine, others are struggling, and some are drowning. People are having to make really hard choices. Many folks are working more than they ever have, and others are seeking desperately to get back to work. Situations are changing rapidly, and one thing we have even less of than usual is clarity. So in the face of this, how are we attentive to time?

On my first day of 9th grade, my history teacher began class by asking the question, "What is time?" and then he wrote in huge letters on the blackboard TIME IS CHANGE. It was one of those moments in my life when I could *feel* my brain rewiring, opening up, and I felt on the precipice of a new understanding. As we talk about time and sabbath, I don't mean the particulars of minutes and seconds, of the system we have ascribed to explain our astronomy and the passage of moments. I mean that force in the universe of change. Time is change, and when we are still, we can connect with that change, with the movement and rhythms of things inside and outside of ourselves in different ways. One way we can connect with a boundless sense of time, is in spiritual practice, when we connect with the infinite and unknowable. How will we spend our precious time? Our experience of time is not uniform. Sometimes it creeps along. Sometimes we are really aware of each moment and sometimes we lose track. We work on a project and suddenly hours have passed. We read a book, or talk with a friend, meditate, sing, get in a great yoga flow and time is elastic. Time passes differently when we are younger than when we are older. And always, there is an opportunity to pause and connect with the infinite that is time.

When talking about sabbath, a line from Psalm 46 is often quoted by preachers, "Be still and know that I am God." Though this language might not exactly be your own metaphor, let's take a look at this Psalm. There is a word in this Psalm that we haven't talked about in a while, *selah*. While there is no written music for the Psalms in scripture, only tradition, there are some notations, like the word *selah*, which is roughly translated as a lyrical pause, though there is no *official* translation and we don't know its meaning for sure. *Selah* appears over 70 times in the

Psalms, and a number of times in Psalm 46. Here is the full text from the New Revised Standard Version:

To the leader. Of the Korahites. According to Alamoth. A Song.

¹ God is our refuge and strength,
a very present* help in trouble.

² Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change,
though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;

³ though its waters roar and foam,
though the mountains tremble with its tumult.

Selah

⁴ There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
the holy habitation of the Most High.

⁵ God is in the midst of it; it shall not be moved;
God will help it when the morning dawns.

⁶ The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter;
he utters his voice, the earth melts.

⁷ The Lord of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our refuge.*

Selah

⁸ Come, behold the works of the Lord;
see what desolations he has brought on the earth.

⁹ He makes wars cease to the end of the earth;
he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear;
he burns the shields with fire.

¹⁰ ‘Be still, and know that I am God!
I am exalted among the nations,
I am exalted in the earth.’

¹¹ The Lord of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our refuge.*

Selah

So clearly, this is a song of praise, sharing the great power of the singer’s God to bless people and places. Their god ends wars and shatters spears. And at the end of the song, God’s voice is quoted, and the first thing they say is, “Be still, and know that I am God!” A refrain is praise that their god is with them, and their refuge. If we go back to Heschel, there are references in this song to the holiness of time, people, and places. This is a story of a personal God, one who is part of a people’s daily lives and helping them in very hard times. This may not be your metaphor, or maybe it is, but let’s take a step back out from the particulars of this language for a minute look at themes evoked. We are living in a time when nations are in uproar, and the earth is shaken, and people are in need of refuge. We all need connection and compassion. What if we were to honor the holiness in time? And by holiness, I mean time as part of the infinite power and mystery of the universe. What if we took a lyrical pause, and were still? *Selah*.

A sabbath will look different for every person, but perhaps now, more than ever is a moment to engage with the holiness of time. What would an intentional pause look like for you? A day of rest? A little time in each day? Time with community or family? Solitude? If your ways of engaging in spiritual practice have had to change, as worship surely has, maybe this is a moment to check in about that. What do you need, so that you can remember that you are not alone in facing whatever is before you? Hard decisions, loneliness, busyness, grief--you are not alone. An infinite stretch of time connects us to all that was and all that will be--to the people who composed Psalm 46, and to all of the universe. Be still. When we pause, we can direct our attention, inward, outward, to time, the universe. Be still and know. We can seek new understanding. We can practice. And it starts with stopping--with honoring the holy in time, and holding time to practice and for sacred rest, whatever that might look like for you.

Hear a selection from Lynn Ungar's words one more time:

And when your body has become still,
reach out with your heart.
Know that we are connected
in ways that are terrifying and beautiful.
(You could hardly deny it now.)
Know that our lives
are in one another's hands.
(Surely, that has come clear.)
Do not reach out your hands.
Reach out your heart.
Reach out your words.
Reach out all the tendrils
of compassion that move, invisibly,
where we cannot touch.¹

In the face of struggle, injustice and grief, may we be met with compassion, and the open hearts of others. May we know that we are not alone, and may *we* be a compassionate presence for others. May we find moments of connection to the infinite, to the holy, to what feeds our spirit, and what challenges us to grow and deepen our connection to all that is. *Selah*.

So may it be. Amen.

¹ <http://www.lynnungar.com/poems/pandemic/>