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“Hope for the Hurried”

Exodus 20:8-11

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Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you will labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. You will not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and consecrated it.

Exodus 20:8-11

Stephen O'Brien, a serious investigative journalist, published a thought-provoking piece on how to pick the right checkout line. The article is a compelling look at “the pain of waiting longer than necessary—even if it’s just a few seconds.” The reporter offers tips on how to avoid the anguish of extra seconds in line. On the way into the store, look for efficient cashiers. Avoid checkers with name tags that say things like “Hi, I’m Mike, this is my first day.” If you hear the words “price check” move quickly. Consider a longer line that has customers with fewer groceries. Don’t look just at the length of lines. Look at who is in the line. Steer clear of customers with coupons or an abundance of produce. The article is critical of those who wait until the transaction is complete to swipe their credit card.

The writer quotes an embarrassed shopper: “I don’t put a lot of thought into the checker or exactly what the customers in line are buying. Maybe I should” (“Get in Line,” Stephen O’Brien).

“Of course, you should! What’s wrong with you?”

Is it scary that reporters assume we worry about “the

pain of waiting longer than necessary—even if it’s just a few seconds”? If journalists are asking, “How do we pick the quickest checkout line?” shouldn’t we ask, “Are we in too much of a hurry?” The problem is not the speed of the cashiers. The problem is us.

We are in such a hurry. There is so much to do: earn a living, care for our relationships, schlep over-programmed children from one activity to another, exercise, and clean the house. Time abhors a vacuum and so do we.

Technology promises to make our lives easier, but in the end computers and i-phones increase the pace of work. We cannot say, “The proposal’s in the mail.”

We want everything fast—uber eats, eyeglasses in an hour, and online doctors’ appointments. Like the white rabbit in *Alice in Wonderland*, we are always in a hurry. There is never a moment when there is not something else we should be doing. We carry a list of things to do in our head. We want to fill every minute. We glorify work at the expense of everything else. We buy into the lie that the busier we are, the more important we are.

The authors of *Time for Life* surveyed 10,000 people about their work and then counted their actual working hours. They discovered that people work far less than they claim. We overstate the number of hours we work because it makes us feel important (Stewart Vogel, *The Ten Commandments*, New York: Cliff Street Books, 1998, 96).

When we believe that busyness is noble, we measure our days by how much we get done, stop nurturing things that matter more, and miss the gifts we’ve been given. We lose our ability to play. We forget our passion. We misplace our priorities. We end up cranky, stressed out,

and not much fun to be with.

The psychiatrist Carl Jung said, “Hurry is not of the devil. Hurry is the devil.”

So here is what we should do. One day a week, we should stop hurrying and enjoy life. Even though we think there is not enough days to get our work done as it is, if we want to be less rushed, on Sundays, we should stop working. I know how crazy this sounds, but it is not my idea. Every seven days, the ancient Hebrews set aside a day to recognize that life is a gift. The Sabbath began as a constitutional guarantee of a day off.

In Exodus the reason is that God rested on the seventh day, and so human beings should do the same. In Deuteronomy’s version of the Ten Commandments, the explanation is the painful memory of slavery in Egypt, and the need to resist any kind of slavery. The Sabbath has brought people to life for 3,400 years.

The Jewish theologian Arthur Waskow said, “If there is a single piece of Jewish wisdom that is most important to the human race, it is the importance of Shabbat.”

When Jews who have been inattentive to their faith return to the synagogue, the rabbi says, “You must begin by keeping the Sabbath.”

When Karl Barth wrote his volume on Christian ethics everyone assumed he would start with a major moral issue—warfare, the environment, or capital punishment. The greatest theologian of the 20th century began his book on ethics with the Sabbath. Barth argued that the foundation for everything we do is the Sabbath.

So if we were serious about keeping the Sabbath holy, how would we do it? We could start by not working, thinking about work, or talking about work. If life is riding a

bike downhill that is going faster and faster and becoming more and more difficult to stop, Sabbaths are stop signs that make time pass slower.

The Sabbath is for enjoying God's gifts, so rest. Relax. Breathe. Sleep. Dream. Hope. Contemplate. Read. Reflect. Pray. Play. Walk. Talk. Listen. Sing. Dance. Love.

Look at the world, see that much of it is good, and give thanks. Receive the Sabbath like children unwrapping gifts. We usually live checking things off our list, but the Sabbath is the opposite. The things on our list are gifts we want to keep and savor, not cross off the list.

The Sabbath breaks into our routine so that we hear God say, "Wake up, this is what your life is about."

The Sabbath is standing back and looking at our life, the way an artist stands back from the canvas to get a broader perspective. We take our lives off the easel to get a better look.

This is not meant to suggest that remembering the Sabbath is easy. It isn't. Holiness is not practical. Most of us do not think we can afford a true Sabbath. We are sure the world will fall apart if we do not get some work done, so we work like alcoholics sneaking a drink. We do not want to admit that we are not indispensable, so we cling to what is familiar and sacrifice what is crucial. We are so afraid to give up even the most mundane aspects of our routine, that it is hard to go through a day without working.

Observing the Sabbath would be easier if the Sabbath would make us more productive the rest of the week, and it might work that way, but it might not. We might get less work done. If we observe the Sabbath, it may not pay off the way we want it to pay off. Maybe it is worth it anyway.

Setting limits on our slavery to our routine could make us happier.

The Sabbath is not just a good idea. The Sabbath is a necessity if we are going to live with Spirit. We need a piece of time that leaves room for God. We need the Sabbath not because it will pay off, but because we need to learn not to look for a payoff. The Sabbath is not meant to lead us to a more efficient life, it is meant to lead us to God. We need the Sabbath to change the other days of the week.

Someone said, "More than the Jews have kept the Sabbath, the Sabbath has kept the Jews."

The Puritan parallel is, "Good Sabbaths make good Christians."

If we spend one seventh of our time going beyond what occupies most of our days, we will learn to push aside small concerns in favor of the Spirit. Attaining some degree of independence from our routine can be the difference between feeling like a gerbil on a wheel and feeling God's grace.

A medieval sage said that after the first six days of creation the world still did not have a soul. God gives the world a soul on the seventh day (Vogel, 106). God revives our sense of the divine, weaves a thread of sacredness into our lives, and teaches us that we have enough time after all.

The Sabbath is the opportunity to taste eternity. At a funeral in an African-American church, the preacher consoled the mourners by telling them that the person they loved had "gone to a place where every day will be Sunday, and Sabbath has no end."

Maybe God is ready whenever we are, for a rehearsal

for those who are willing to rest in God. How do we make this day holy? By seeing that it already is.

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