

God Gathers Us to Build a Better World

Pastor Jason Bryan-Wegner

Isaiah 58:16-14

Is not this the fast that I choose:

to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?

Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly;
your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the Lord shall be your rearguard.

Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.

If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,
if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,
then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday.

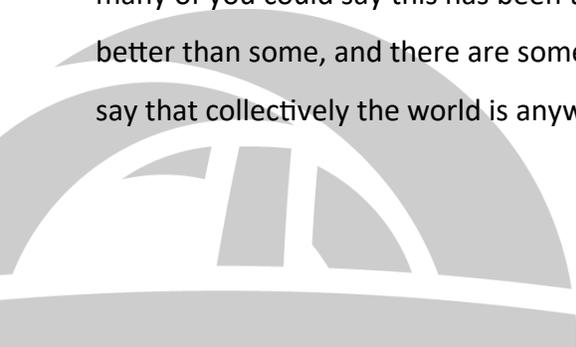
The Lord will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places,
and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden,

like a spring of water, whose waters never fail. Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;

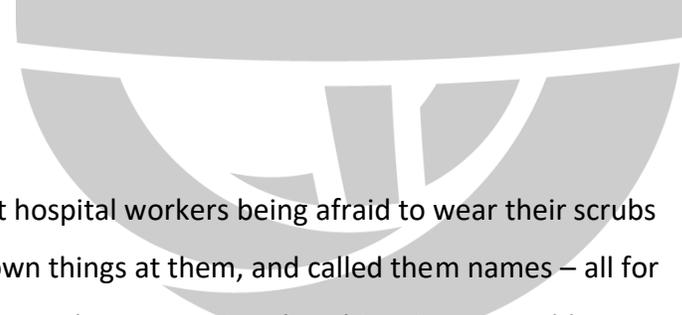
you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.

If you refrain from trampling the sabbath, from pursuing your own interests on my holy day; if you call the sabbath a delight and the holy day of the Lord honourable;

if you honour it, not going your own ways, serving your own interests, or pursuing your own affairs; then you shall take delight in the Lord, and I will make you ride upon the heights of the earth; I will feed you with the heritage of your ancestor Jacob, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.



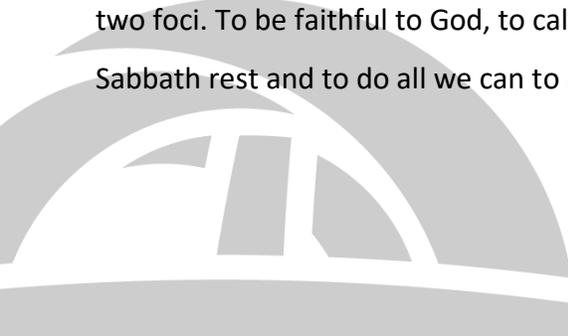
If I were to ask you whether you have been living your best life over the last couple of years, I would doubt many of you could say this has been the case. Though some of us may have weathered these last couple years better than some, and there are some signs that things are more “normal” than they have been, it’s hard to say that collectively the world is anywhere near its best these days.

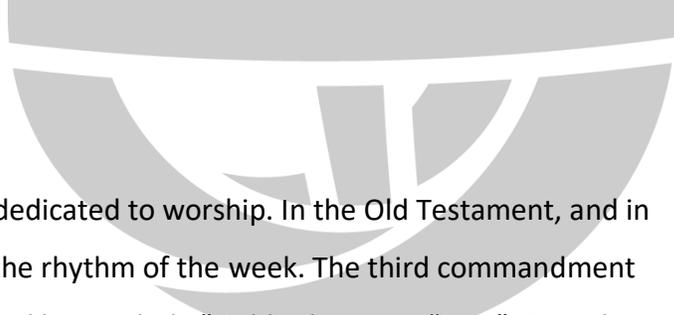


I heard a disturbing story on the radio the other day about hospital workers being afraid to wear their scrubs outside of work because people have harassed them, thrown things at them, and called them names – all for caring for people who are sick and dying. These situations anywhere are a sign that things in our world are anything but normal. Part of getting to a better place, a healthier place for all of us, is to “confront the brutal facts”, as business guru Jim Collins, would say. The world is facing a tremendous amount of stress. Whether directly or indirectly, we all are experiencing prolonged stress, weariness, and disorientation. As much as we’re trying to act as if things were normal, they’re not. And the more we keep pretending, the more disorienting it seems to be. It’s not normal to attack people who provide health care for our communities. It’s not normal for school board members and administrators to receive death threats for trying to protect our kids and community from illness. It’s not normal for people who claim a faith in Jesus to cling to personal freedoms ahead of anything else when the Gospel calls Christians to put the needs of our neighbors ahead of our own needs out of Christian love and faithfulness. It’s good to remind ourselves and others that these things are anything but “normal”.

One thing that might be helpful to acknowledge is that we’re still in a season of survival mode, where just making it through the day can feel like a major victory. But we don’t want to stay here forever. God’s vision for us is not to simply survive. God’s vision throughout Scripture and history is that all creation flourish – even, and especially when things are not going as well as we’d hoped or planned. We belong to a God who enters the mess and stress of life and makes ways through the wilderness to lead people to places of abundance. We place our faith in a God who doesn’t shrink from suffering, but embraces and transforms even death into new life. The God of Scripture is a God who takes the most challenging of experiences and builds from them a better world and calls us into that work at precisely those times. In other words, God doesn’t expect that everything be perfect in your life before you can flourish, and God doesn’t wait for the world to get it all right before God acts. In fact, God’s work in us is often most transformative when things are a bit of a mess.

A couple things are abundantly clear from reading this passage of Isaiah. God cares deeply about two interrelated things - our worship of God and our care for the most vulnerable. It’s impossible to separate these two foci. To be faithful to God, to call ourselves God’s people is to dedicate time and energy to worship and Sabbath rest and to do all we can to alleviate the suffering of our neighbors.





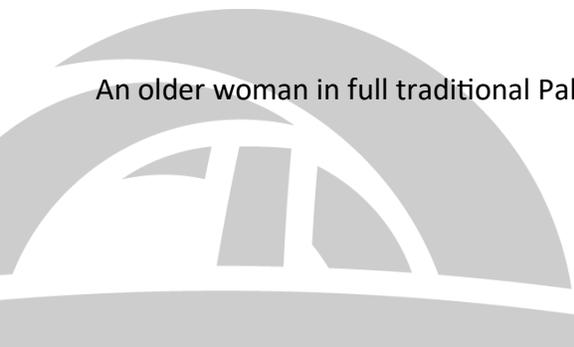
God doesn't intend for Sabbath to be just an hour a week dedicated to worship. In the Old Testament, and in many faith traditions today, Sabbath is an integral part of the rhythm of the week. The third commandment given to Moses in Exodus is "Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy." Sabbath means "stop". Stop the grind of the week and give thanks for a day. Stop to honor God. Stop shouldering all the responsibility once a week and trust in the ways God provides, without all your effort and energy. Traditionally, Sabbath was rest from work for oneself, which allowed rest for ones' neighbors, and even rest for the animals that labored with the people. Remember that God rested on the seventh day of Creation, and all creation rested with God. Sabbath is God's design. It leads communities to rhythms of justice and mercy. In it, God seeks to hold the rhythms of life and relationship in balance so that all may flourish.

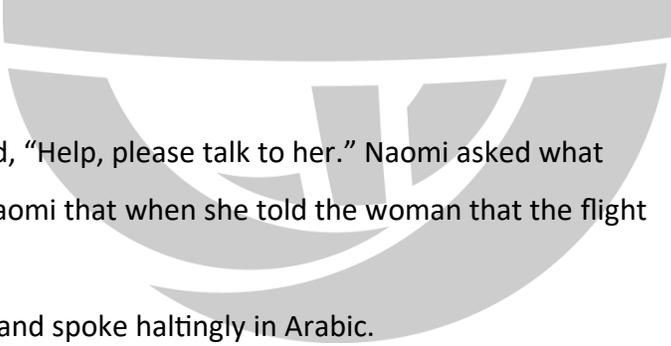
Maybe for some, myself included, stopping is not as easy as it seems. Stopping can sound like a pain because it can feel like if we stop there will just be more work to do when we start back up. Or so we might think. But what if Sabbath, intentional stopping, allows us to recognize what is sustainable and life-giving? What if truly stopping during the week breaks the yoke of oppressive work habits and the feeling that it's enough to just survive? What if Sabbath sets us free for God and for others and helps build a better world and improves how we relate to our neighbors? What if Sabbath is meant to give us time to see and respond to others who are stuck in systems that don't provide them a flourishing life either?

God speaks through the prophet Isaiah – "Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?"

Writer Naomi Shihab Nye was wandering through the Albuquerque Airport one afternoon, after learning her flight had been delayed when she heard an announcement: "If anyone in the vicinity of Gate A-4 understands Arabic, please come to the gate immediately. Gate A-4 was her gate. Her father was from Palestine, she knew enough Arabic to maybe be helpful. So she went back there.

An older woman in full traditional Palestinian embroidered dress, just like her grandma wore, was crumpled to





the floor, wailing. The airline staff looked at Naomi and said, “Help, please talk to her.” Naomi asked what caused the woman to start wailing? The airline staff told Naomi that when she told the woman that the flight would be delayed, the woman started crying.

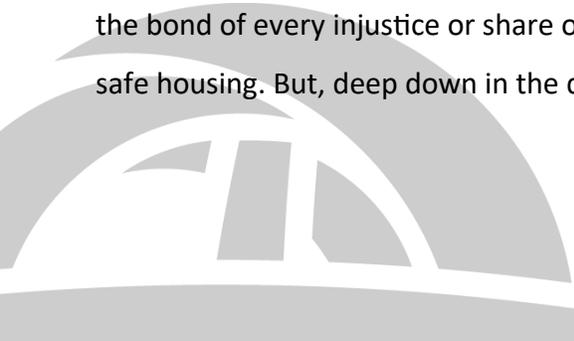
Naomi stooped down and put her arm around the woman and spoke haltingly in Arabic.

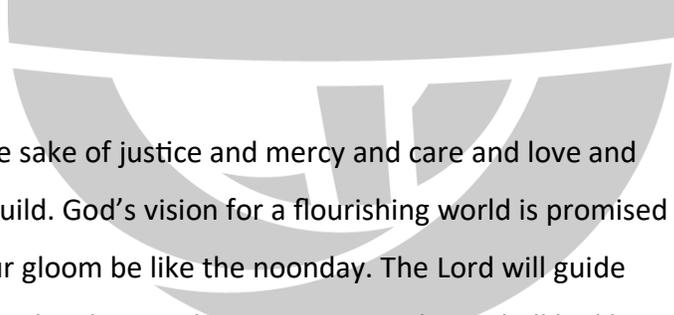
“Shu-dow-a, Shu-bid-uck Habibti? Stani schway, Min fadlick, Shu-bit-se-wee?” The minute she heard any words she knew the woman stopped crying. It turned out she thought the flight had been cancelled. She needed to be in El Paso for major medical treatment the next day. Naomi told her things were going to be okay, they would get there – together. Then Naomi suggested they call the person who would pick her up from the airport and let them know.

They called the woman’s son. Naomi told him she would stay with his mother and ride next to her on the flight. Then they called her other sons just for fun. Then they called Naomi’s dad and he and the woman spoke for a while in Arabic and found out, of course, that they had ten shared friends. The woman’s tears turned to laughter. She shared stories of her life. She patted Naomi on the knee affectionately as they talked. Then she pulled a sack of homemade mamool cookies — little powdered sugar crumbly mounds stuffed with dates and nuts — from her bag — and offered them to all the women at the gate. They all accepted the treats. It was like a sacrament. The traveler from Argentina, the mom from California, the woman from Laredo. Soon, they were all covered with the same powdered sugar. And smiling. Because of the long delay, the airline showed up with free apple juice in big coolers and two little girls from the flight - covered with powdered sugar and cookie crumbs - ran around serving it.

As Naomi looked around the gate and saw all the late and weary travelers she thought, “This is the world I want to live in. The shared world. Not a single person in that gate — once the crying of confusion stopped— seemed apprehensive about any other person.

That delay was a kind of unexpected Sabbath. The people couldn’t go. They had to stop. And when they did they saw each other. They cared for each other. They helped each other through. We may not be able to loose the bond of every injustice or share our bread with everyone who is hungry or shelter everyone who seeks safe housing. But, deep down in the depths of our spirits, don’t we want to live in a shared world, like Naomi





experienced? A world that feels like it is regathering for the sake of justice and mercy and care and love and peace. This is the world God has created and called us to build. God's vision for a flourishing world is promised in Isaiah, "then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday. The Lord will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail."

That doesn't sound like a life of simple survival. It sounds like full and abundant life. Life that doesn't depend solely on our own efforts, but relies on God's promise to regather and renew, to bring hope and light to the world. Life rarely feels perfect, and what we consider "normal" may still be a long way off, but we follow a God who is building a better world, a more just world right now, and even on our toughest days, God is inviting us to be part of building that better world too. Amen.

