

Sabbath as Resistance: Resisting the Attention Economy

Recap Previous Sermons

- Stan – Gen 1, Exo 13, Mark 2 (Disciples and grain, sabbath for man). **Sacred Rest**
- Josh – Lk 6, Jesus Lord of sabbath, healing on sabbath. **Resist anything that drowns out the deep sacred chord.**
- Ian and Jo – Sabbath rest, healing, Heb 4, labour to enter the rest. **Strive to enter rest. Walking in pace with Jesus.**
- Peter and Co. – Pilgrimage. **Sacred time, simplicity of pilgrimage, connecting with sacred space and local history.**

We've covered the idea of sacred rest, which is one of the foundations for the 4th commandment as it is presented to us in Exodus. However, Deuteronomy gives us a different reason for the institution of the Sabbath. The reason Israel must keep the Sabbath and sponsor a system of Sabbath rest for all the household, including servants, animals, and foreigners was because they were slaves, and God liberated them. In Deuteronomy the Sabbath is less about resting than it is about economic justice, and ensuring that the system that resulted in slavery, coercion and anxiety is not replicated in the covenant community. Walter Brueggemann focuses largely on this explanation in *Sabbath as Resistance*.

He explores Sabbath as forming an alternative reality to the economic driven reality of the secular world. The foil in the Scriptures for Brueggemann is the anxious Pharaoh who dreams of scarcity despite being the wealthiest man in the known world, and the anxious economy of acquisition that he created. The people of God are liberated from slavery under this system and are called to "sponsor a system of rest that contradicts the system of anxiety of Pharaoh." This morning I want to explore social/economic aspect of Sabbath. Specifically, when I reflected on Sabbath as resistance, the word 'distractions' came to mind. We too, like Pharaoh live in an anxious system. Pharaoh, you will recall, was haunted by a nightmare of scarcity, by visions of famine, of starving cows gobbling up fat cows. Our

scarcity today, (at least for now in our context) is not a scarcity of grain. Rather, in an age of overabundance, the scarcity we face is that of our attention.

Problem in the world

Political scientist and psychologist Herbert Simon wrote: “[I]n an information-rich world, the wealth of information means a dearth of something else: a scarcity of whatever it is that information consumes. What information consumes is rather obvious: it consumes the attention of its recipients. Hence a wealth of information creates *a poverty of attention* and a need to allocate that attention efficiently among the overabundance of information sources that might consume it.” He wrote that in 1971! Think how much poorer in attention we might be today. Attention is treated as a scarce resource, and something that is incredibly valuable in our modern economy. To the point that some economic theorists call our modern economy the attention economy. Billions of dollars are spent creating apps, services, user interfaces and digital ecosystems that capture our attention. This is affecting us all individually – for example, I was talking to my mum recently, and she mentioned that she was trying, yet struggling to read a book over summer, she mentioned how challenging it was to focus. Now I always remember my mum reading. Especially a summer novel, devoured in a few sittings. Likewise, our collective attentive has become short – think of how quickly news moves to meet the demands of our short attention spans. Our brains are being shaped by an economic system where our attention has become the battle ground. If you’re feeling distracted, that your attention is being pulled in a million different directions, then remember that your chaotic, fraught internal state isn’t an accident, it’s a business model. I know that for myself, I have gotten into a bad habit, which started around the time of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, which was to reach for my “daily fresh horrors device” to see

if there was still a civilisation out my front door, pulling up BBC before reaching for my ESV (Bible). I have been feeling fraught and fragmented, unable to be fully present.

Problem in the text

Of course, this state of mind is not new, just supercharged like it never has been before. But we see this is the story of Mary and Martha. We've heard that "Martha was *distracted* with much serving." The key word being distracted. Jesus said to her, "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things." Martha was anxious and distracted. The Greek word *merimnas* translated into anxious literally means divided, or shattered into pieces, pulled apart by sinful worry. This mindset resulted in judgement (even to Jesus, "do you care?"), blame and demands. I cannot think of a more apt description of our society. We are a fractured, distracted, divided people, quick to judge and blame.

Invitation in the text

1. Be present.

While the Sabbath is not mentioned in the passage, Jesus invites Martha out of the anxious economy of Pharaoh. He invites her not to be anxious and divided but to be present. I don't think that Jesus is critiquing Martha's activity, but her mental state during it. Anxiety.

Comparison. Judgement. Brueggemann talks about such a state of mind by suggesting that Sabbath is a resistance to multitasking, which he defines as "the drive to be more than we are, to control more than we do, to extend our power and our effectiveness. Such a practice yields a divided self, with full attention given to nothing." The problem was not that she was doing, but that she was not present. Jesus is inviting Martha to be present. He points to her sister as one who recognised what the context called for. **Sabbath demands we be here, now.** Present to God, present to others, present to our surroundings, present to ourselves. For our sake and the sake of others. The attention economy stops us being present to our

moment, bombarding us with information and a false sense of urgency, but all stripped of context in time and place.

So how might we respond to this that we are able to resist distractions? One solution that I have heard some Christian voices advocating for a complete withdrawal from the digital attention economy, from “the machine” as Paul Kingsnorth has put it, to remain human, and to preserve the Church. As the desert mothers and fathers did and others have done throughout the centuries. The Trappist monk Thomas Merton had this impulse, to withdraw from the busyness of the world into solitude and contemplation. But on a trip to a mall with a fellow monk, he looked around at the people and felt God’s love for them. Complete withdrawal could not be an option. Jenny Odell: “The removal and contemplation were necessary, but that same contemplation would always bring one back around to their responsibilities and to the world. For Merton, there was no question of whether or not to participate, only how.” Merton wrote: If I had no choice about the age in which I was to live, I nevertheless have a choice about the attitude I take and about the way and the extent of my participation in its living ongoing events. To choose the world is... an acceptance of a task and a vocation in the world, in history and in time. In my time, which is the present.” I think, possibly more than anything else, it is the positive practices of Sabbath keeping that have maintained the Jewish people throughout their diaspora through time and place. It has sustained them in place across centuries when they have not been in a homeland. Has enabled them to resist the pressures of culture, to have a weekly reset, a day set apart unto the Lord, to be trained in the art of resisting the machine. Jenny Odell writes in *How to Do Nothing*: There is a revolutionary aspect of taking back our attention.

2. Know purpose from a place of rest

Secondly, Jesus encourages Martha to move from being fragmented and distracted, to see and pursue “one thing.” Only One thing is necessary. We see this too in Jesus when he is interrupted by the disciples, everyone is looking for you. He is about to be pulled in many different directions. Jesus too was not oblivious to demands on his time and attention.

Jesus responds rather than reacts. Responds from a place of internal integrity. Now, that is not to say, to be so caught up in my own affairs that I avoid interruptions. But note how Jesus responds to the interruption. With a sense of clarity of purpose. Distractions keep us from doing the things we want to do. As they accumulate, they undermine our ability for reflection. Jesus had a clear practice of contemplation and withdrawal to clarify and reflect on his purpose.

Last week, Peter concluded the thoughts on pilgrimage with a poem by John O’Donohue.

The paragraph that struck me was:

Make sure, before you go, to take the time
To bless your going forth,
To free your heart of ballast
So that the compass of your soul
Might direct you toward
The territories of spirit
Where **you will discover**
More of your hidden life,
And **the urgencies that deserve to claim you.**

I love the imagery of freeing our hearts of ballast. But I initially didn’t like the line about discovering “the urgencies that deserve to claim you.” No thanks. I don’t want any urgencies to claim me. But as I reflected on it, and on this sermon, and Jesus’ response to the disciples I realised, urgencies will always try to claim us. Even if it is just notifications for things on our phones that are irrelevant. To be able to say no to the distractions, and the things that

fragment us, we need to know what our yes is. To know from a place of prayerful reflection, restoration, and contemplation, what is the urgency that deserves to claim us?

So the question for us as individuals is, 'what's your one thing?' And for us as a community?

What is St. George's 'one thing' this year? The practice of retreat, contemplation and rhythms of Sabbath is how we gain that perspective on what, and to whom, and where our responsibility lies. Sabbath Keeping is a revolutionary social act of economic resistance that has ripples throughout the social fabric, and will enable us to resist being distracted, fragmented and anxious, to reclaim our attention.

What might Sabbath resistance as a revolutionary act of taking back our attention and finding our 'One thing' look like for you? For us as a community? What does having a Sabbath from the attention economy look like for me at this moment?

- Screen free day. I have tried vaguely to have a screen free day. To make Sunday a screen free day, unless I am doing something as a social act, for example with tomorrow being a holiday, perhaps the girls and I will have a movie night.
- Changing the settings to remove and/or silence all notifications on my phone.
- Charging phone away from bedroom and only touching it after a time of prayer and contemplation.
- Making screen black and white on my phone.
- Buying a watch?