

Sermon 8-31-25
Paul Purdue preaching

"In the beginning", the Creation Hymn declares that the Earth was covered in darkness. When you think of "the Earth", do you think of the Blue Marble photograph of earth floating in outer space? On December 7, 1972 Apollo 17 flew far enough away from earth to fit the whole planet in the camera's viewfinder, over 18,000 miles away. Harrison Schmitt, Gene Cernan and Ronald Evans were the last human beings to travel so far from earth! Do you wonder if when Abraham and Sarah counted the stars 4000 years ago, they could imagine a rocket circling the earth at 17,400 miles per hour?

"In the Beginning" the Earth was empty, void, without shape, covered in darkness as the Spirit/Wind/Breath of God swept over the waters. Dean Yolanda Pierce reminds us that before creating light, God dwelled in darkness. Exodus 20:21 tells us that *"Moses drew near to the thick darkness where God was."* Jesus often retreated outside at night to pray in solitude. Howard Thurman spoke of God's *"luminous darkness"* as a place of provision, protection and healing. When we close our eyes in prayer we retreat into the peace of God's luminous darkness. (The Wounds Are The Witness) After God named the light as good, God rested in the luminous darkness.

On the second day, God made raindrops, fog, clouds and sky. That was enough work for one day and God rested.

On Wednesday or a Jewish Tuesday, God made beaches, fields, and mountains; creeks, rivers, and seas; flowers, fruit, and trees. God admired everything and then rested.

On Thursday, God created the sun, moon, and stars to help us remember Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Easter and Advent. Do you wonder if the Creation poet imagined light existing before God created the sun, moon and stars? Or perhaps the text simply invites us to stop and see God's grandeur in sunrises and sunsets, God's wonder in millions of stars against a pitch black sky, and the universe's order that allows us to create calendars and charts to guide our ships across a landless sea?

On Friday God sculpted crawfish, Blue whales and every swimming creature. Then God created Monarch Butterflies, California Condors and everything else that fills the skies. Is it humbling that God blessed the sharks and sparrows before blessing us? Then God rested

On the sixth day, God made chipmunks, Cape Buffalos and every other creature. Yesterday, I was paddling on the Stones River and paused before a little rapid, when I saw the biggest buck I have ever seen in Davidson County. I sat in the eddie and watched it wade across the river. Did God pause and watch a gazelle run or laugh as the monkeys swung through the trees?

As God's workweek wound down, God thought *"let us make human beings in our image. Let us make human beings in the very image of God. So God made us, in the image of God, in the image of the divine God made us."* The phrase "original sin" does not appear in the Bible, theologians extrapolated it from the Bible. The Bible begins with God's original blessing. We are made in the very image of God and God calls us and everything else supremely good. God rested and that was the sixth day.

Did you know it would be over 1000 years before scribes added numbers, chapters and verses to the Bible? I think they made a mistake in ending chapter one before the story ended. By ending on day six chapter one separates sabbath from the rest of Creation. We do that all the time separating production from rest. Some ancient textual traditions like the Septuagint, Syriac Version, and Masoretic texts render chapter 2 verse 2 *"On the seventh day God finished the work that God had done"* making sabbath part of God's creative process. The old rabbis believed that on the seventh day God created rest.

Sabbath is a design feature, recommended to us by our manufacturer. Sadly, humans do not come equipped with a check spiritual engine light that warns us to service our souls before we blow up, fall apart or melt down! We are created to cease striving, doing, making, producing and consuming. We are so driven to achieve, that we have professionalized games, sports, hobbies and arts.

If we want to cultivate the image of God within us we need to learn to set aside our everyday pursuits and reset. God designed us to rest, reflect, and to re-imagine the world. When do you prayerfully consider the week gone by and the future?

In July, the Talker Institute released a study for a screen free audio device indicating that parents reported needing 2.5 to recover from vacation. In the study, 64% of parents say they feel the weight of making every moment magical. That is too much. We want to make sure our children don't miss out or fall behind, but our manifold efforts to keep our children engaged, educated and entertained may be diminishing their own inner content, creativity and inner lives. We need to practise closing our eyes and dwelling in the rich luminous darkness of prayer, wonder, dreams, visioning, and awe.

I grew up largely without television. When I complained that I was bored to my mother, an educator, she would ask: "whose fault is that?" I once spent two days, dozens and cardboard boxes, rolls of string, and every roll of tape in our house to build a multifloored fort for my action figures. The fort stretched from the top bunk across the bedroom floor to the dresser. My mom laughed and dad fussed about the cost of duct tape, but they let me keep it up for a couple of months. Sabbath makes space for prayer, daydreaming and reimagining the world.

Last Fall, I was training for a 20 mile, 3 day, 2 night hike trip! Training for vacation! I tried to get in some sort of hike every weekend so I would not be the last backpacker up the mountain. On a beautiful fall afternoon, I set out hiking until I reached a small creek, when

suddenly a gust of wind beckoned a stand of tulip poplars to release their leaves. I stood transfixed as the wind sang and thousands of yellow leaves spun and twirled gliding down to the forest floor. Yolanda Pierce writes *“The idea that we are made from dust and stardust- emerging from a soil so ancient that the dinosaurs may have tread upon it, connected to a cosmos so vast that it is beyond our comprehension-fills me with awe. How can I help but marvel at a single drop of water, which has changed forms multiple times through the water cycle over billions of years and yet can still quench my thirst? (The Wounds Are The Witness).”* I found myself lost in wonder, love, poetry, and praise, until my watch chirped a message from my fitness app- *“Was I through with my workout it wanted to know?”*. When I looked up from my phone, the leave’s magical dance had already ended.

Sabbathing is almost anti-American because it tells us to cease, to stop working, to stop doing, to stop competing, to stop producing, to stop swiping and instead to dwell with God, our own souls, one another and the world.

Prayer, meditation, silence, day-dreaming, worship and awe invite us into the presence of God, allowing us to connect with ourselves, our fears, our hopes, our dreams, our past, and our future. Prayer is much harder work than scrolling social media. Our inner algorithms are often rusty from neglect. I personally struggle to sabbath for a whole day. I forget the “off” on my day off. I forget that vacation shares root words with vacate and vacant! I lost an argument to Connie about that once! How can we hear from God or even ourselves, if we are always moving, always scrolling, and always seeking to be entertained?

In the face of terrible tragedies like those in Minnesota this week, some well meaning people have spoken negatively about *“thoughts and prayers.”* Of course they are not really putting down thought, or at least I hope not. Perhaps, they are feeling this way about prayer, because we have forgotten that prayer primarily changes the person praying. In Luke 18, Jesus tells a story about two people who go into the temple to pray. One prays a self-congratulatory, self-serving prayer *“Lord, I thank you that I am not like other people”* but the other person prays with deep self-reflection and a yearning to know God’s mercy. Only one comes away changed.

Prayer changes us as we enter the luminous darkness where God dwells. Sabbath can be a deep retreat into the goodness and beauty that surrounds us even when badness seems to hold the day. Sabbath rests our souls. Sabbath sends us forth to do the work of creating community, love and justice.

Isaiah chapter 58 warns us about phony perfunctory prayers, worship and fasting that does not change us or engage us in acts of love and justice . God speaks

Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the straps 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,

But what empowers such healing actions? Isaiah invites us to learn how to keep the sabbath.

If you hold back your foot from unnecessary travel on the Sabbath,
from pursuing your own pleasures on my holy day;
if you call the Sabbath a delight
and the holy day of the Lord honorable;
if you honor it, not going your own ways,
serving your own interests or pursuing your own affairs;
then you shall take delight in the Lord,
and you will ride upon the heights of the earth;
I will sustain you with the heritage of your ancestor Jacob,
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken..

Oh friends, let us learn how to better keep the sabbath. Let us enter the luminous darkness that heals, empowers us, and sends us forth to love. Let us learn to sabbath, to cease, to reset, so we might fall more deeply in love with God, ourselves, one another, and our world. Amen