

Sabbath

Welcome to this time of quiet. It is intended to fill a day, but you may prefer to take shorter times over a number of days; or you might like to read it all through and come back another time to focus on one part of it. Please do what is best for you and fits with where your head is at the moment.

I have used ideas and material from Slee, Nicola, *Sabbath, The hidden heartbeat of our lives*, 2019, Darton. Longman and Todd, with permission from the publisher.

The drawing of the cows on page 5 is by Roy Lorrain-Smith.

Preparation

You will need to bring the following items to where you will take part in this day:

- your computer, if you are doing this online; or your paper copy of the materials if you have printed them out;
- you will need your computer to play the video from the link on the final page;
- your Bible;
- a notebook and pen, if you like to jot things down to help you think;
- coloured pens if you like to doodle or draw out your thoughts.

Find yourself a comfortable spot and take a few minutes to settle down. Be aware of the chair beneath you and the ground beneath your feet. Listen to the noises you can hear, close by or in the distance. Breathe in and out, and be aware of your breathing and how the air flows into you and out of you. If you have breathing difficulties, remain in this place until your breathing calms to a state where you can move on. Take your time – God is in no rush!

Sabbath rest as part of the rhythm of the week

The Sabbath was given as a gift to the people of Israel when they escaped from Egypt. There they had been slaves, and their work had been hard and physical, making bricks for the new cities that the Egyptians were building.

When Moses asked that the people be allowed some time to go and worship God, their work was made even harder as the straw needed for brick-making was no longer supplied, and the Israelites had to find straw themselves, yet still make the same amount of bricks.

This might sound familiar, if you have been in a workplace where staff reductions were made, and the remaining staff had to cover the work done by those who were no longer there. Yet in the church too we can demand more and more from the people that come. In her book *Sabbath, The hidden heartbeat of our lives*, Nicola Slee writes:

The Church becomes another Pharaoh, anxious about its future and driven by its insecurity to demand more and more from its members and especially its paid representatives: more bricks, more barns, more bums on seats, more innovative mission projects, more training – for less and less. (*Sabbath*, p.32)

For reflection:

Has church felt a bit like this, as there have been fewer people to do more and more complicated jobs, with no possibility of giving them up because there is no-one to hand over to?

Reflect on how you have felt about this, and how it has affected your relationship with God.

You might like to make some notes as you reflect in each section.

Sabbath rest making everyone equal

In the second listing of the Ten Commandments, given as the people of Israel were about to enter the Promised Land, Deuteronomy 5:12-15 records it like this, in the New Revised Standard Version:

Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy, as the Lord your God commanded you. For six days you shall labour and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work – you, or your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox or your donkey or any of your livestock, or the resident alien in your towns, so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you. Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day.

The Israelites were to remember that they had been slaves, and so this day of rest was for all people. Their slaves were not to continue working in order that their masters could rest. Animals too were allowed to have a day off work and to rest from their labours.

For reflection:

What difference does it make that the Sabbath begins at sunset, is celebrated with a meal and then leads into a restful evening and sleep, and into a new day of rest before ending at the following sunset, rather than beginning when we wake up and taking us through a day and into the evening of that same day?

Which do you think best represents God's way of blessing us?

A farmer's poem about Sabbath.

I go among trees and sit still.
All my stirring around me becomes quiet
like circles of water.
My tasks lie in their places
where I left them, asleep like cattle.

Then what is afraid of me comes
and lives for a while in my sight.
What it fears in me leaves me,
and the fear of me leaves it.
It sings, and I hear its song.

Then what I am afraid of comes
I live for a while in its sight.
What I fear in it leaves it,
and the fear of it leaves me.
It sings, and I hear its song.

After days of labor,
mute in my consternations,
I hear my song at last,
and I sing it. As we sing,
the day turns, the trees move.

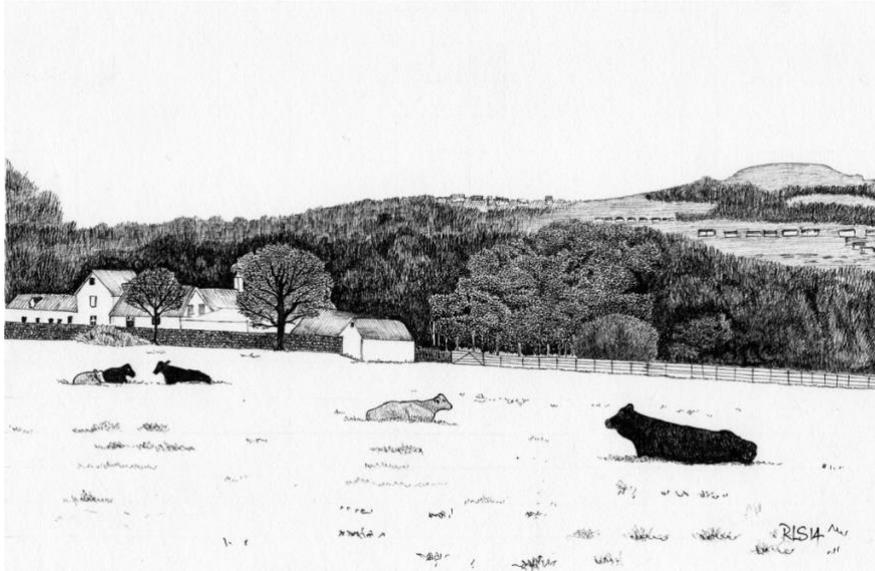
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As a farmer, this poet's place of daily work is the fields that make up his farm. He takes his sabbath in the woods, among the trees, away from the sight of his daily working round. Here he can walk, or rest, as he needs, and take time for contemplation.

In the preface to his poems, Berry notes:

We are to rest on the sabbath also, I have supposed, in order to understand that the providence or the productivity of the living world, the most essential work, continues while we rest.

Leaving tasks undone



Berry draws on his farm work in the image of the tasks that need doing as like cattle, asleep where he left them. These cattle in one of Roy's pictures are lying down. And while they lie down, they are chewing the cud: chewing again on grass they ate earlier. Grass is difficult to digest and so cows need to bring up what they have eaten back into their mouths to chew it over again. While excessive rumination may be seen as unhealthy for us, we need space to think over what we have been doing, and to chew it over so that we might then put it to rest. A sabbath gives us this space to free our minds from the thoughts that would otherwise clog them up.

For reflection:

What is your work?

What tasks do you need to lay down and rest from, trusting that God can work even when you are not working?

Where for you is "the woods", where you can go for rest and recreation?

What blessings do you receive from being there?

Looking deeper inside ourselves

Then what is afraid of me comes
and lives for a while in my sight.
What it fears in me leaves me,
and the fear of me leaves it.
It sings, and I hear its song.

Then what I am afraid of comes.
I live for a while in its sight.
What I fear in it leaves it,
and the fear of it leaves me.
It sings, and I hear its song.

I hope we will all have experienced being close to a wild animal that hasn't noticed us. We sit or stand quietly so that we will not frighten it, watching it graze or play. Not only do we not speak, we even try to breathe more quietly as we focus on this beautiful animal.

Our deepest thoughts and feelings elude us or are buried while we are busy with tasks. We need to make space for those deep things to surface. It may take time, and there may well be fear of seeing what is in ourselves. Many people avoid silence because they fear that in putting down their roles, they will lose who they are, and find nothing inside. Yet when we still ourselves and face what is there, we find that the fear will be transformed into gift; that we are so much more than the things we do; that God has gifts for us beyond what we had dreamed of, that he wants to call us to roles where we are not merely filling the gaps but following our vocation.

For reflection:

Are you doing the work you were called and made to do, which only you can do, and which no one else would do in the same way you would?
Have you become the person you are called to be, or someone else?
What might the silence have to teach you?
Have you found this after churches closed and quiet came?

During lockdown we have all put down our tasks. For some this has been a welcome relief. For others it has led to questioning who they are and what God is calling them to. But now as the situation seems to be easing and the government has said that churches can open again for worship, we wonder what we need to pick up, and what needs to be left behind. This is hard. We have never been here before, we have no experience of this. We do not know the way ahead. But we do know the One who leads us.

After days of labor,
mute in my consternations,
I hear my song at last,
and I sing it. As we sing,
the day turns, the trees move.

This man who has lost his sense of self in the daily round, has found it again in silence. He has heard his song again, and he sings it. We too need to listen for our song - not the music of the church, but the song that God sings to us, the song he wants us to sing with him. We need to follow our calling, the calling he has placed upon us, the calling that fits us perfectly and allows us to grow as we follow it. Then, enriched by Sabbath, enter again the world of church and work with a new vision, and a fresh appreciation of what we do.

For reflection:

As you look at what you have put down during this time, what needs to be left where it is, and what needs to be picked up again?

How can the cycle of work and rest be strengthened in our life together as church, so that all can follow their calling and have regular time to reflect on it?

I go among trees

Wendell Berry notes that part of the discipline of Sabbath is to realise that the work of the world goes on while we rest, and does not depend on us. All that we have, comes from God. Take time to reflect on that as you watch this video and listen to the words of the song.

Play Trees video on Youtube - <https://youtu.be/e0UDkmljcs>

At the end of this time, offer to God all that you have thought about, and ask him to be at work in you so that this time will lead to a deeper relationship with him and with yourself.

If you would like to talk over any of the issues raised, please contact one of the ministers for a conversation. Their details can be found at www.bradfordnorth.org.uk/team.html