



Title	⇒	“He Ceased And Caught His Breath”
Scripture		Exodus 19: 1-9a, 20: 1-11
Minister		The Reverend Matthew Ruttan
Place		Westminster Presbyterian Church, Barrie, ON
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Note		This text is an approximate rendering; this message was visually animated

Minister: Peace be with you
Congregation: And also with you



“Harry Lewis is dean of the undergraduate school at Harvard. In early 2001, he attended a meeting at which students were invited to air their grievances about staff at the Ivy League university. One undergraduate kicked up a memorable fuss. He wanted to double major in Biology and English, and cram all the work into three, instead of the usual four, years. He was exasperated with his academic advisor, who was unable, or unwilling to devise a schedule to accommodate all the courses. As he listened to the student moan about being held back, Lewis felt a light bulb flash above his head.

“I remember thinking, ‘Wait a minute, you need help, but not in the way you think you do,’” says the dean. “You need to take time to think about what is really important, rather than trying to figure out how to pack as much as you can into the shortest possible schedule.”...

In the summer of 2001, the dean wrote an open letter to every first-year undergraduate at Harvard. It was an impassioned plea for a new approach to life on campus and beyond... The letter, which now goes out to Harvard freshmen every year, is entitled: *Slow Down*.

Over seven pages, Lewis makes the case for getting more out of university—and life—by doing less... “Empty time is not a vacuum to be filled,” writes the dean. “It is the thing that enables the other things on your mind to be creatively rearranged, like the empty square in the 4 x 4 puzzle that makes it possible to move the other fifteen pieces around.” In other words, doing nothing, being Slow, is an essential part of good thinking.”¹

It is good advice from the dean of Harvard university. But for us, as followers of Christ, “good thinking” is not enough. We want “good being.” We want soul-wellness. We want an answer to the barren cry of the psalmist when he sings in Psalm 63: “God, my God, for you I search. My throat thirsts for you. My flesh yearns for you in a land waste and parched with no water.” For us, the impulse to slow down is not a new idea. It is as old as Mount Sinai. The most profound and venerable Jewish Rabbi, Abraham Joshua Heschel, wrote this: “In the language of the Bible the world was brought into being in the six days of creation, yet its survival depends upon the holiness of the seventh day.”² Its *survival* depends on the holiness of the seventh.

Commandment 4: “Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy.”



A few months ago I said something in one of my messages to you that had a curious and fairly wide-spread response. I said that busyness is one of our unspoken cultural values. Something we unknowingly hold up high as a virtue. Although busyness is something that we seemingly try not to be, it is something that many of us are. In that message I invited you to pay attention to when you asked someone how they were, to see

what they said in response. I suggested that the reply, at least in my own experience lately, was “Good; busy, but good.” Since that time, many of you have come to me and confessed to hearing it with incredible frequency. It’s like something that when you start to look for it, you realize how everywhere it is. Like pregnant people if you’re trying to conceive a baby. Like bars if you’re struggling with alcoholism. Like friends on a walk laughing together if you are lonely. These people said to me that they not only heard this response, but were caught red-handed saying it themselves. How are you? “Good; busy, but good.” We frown at being so busy; but can often wear our busyness as a kind of Boy Scout honour badge.

Another thing I have noticed is what people say to each other when the weekend is over. Try listening to what people say to each other on Monday mornings. “How was your weekend, Greg?” “How was your weekend, Heather?” Usually, the response has something to do with how it just wasn’t long enough. But I have a suspicion: If we added another day to every weekend, our response would always be the same on Tuesday. At a time management conference a friend went to a few years ago, executives from various levels were asked “If you could have one more thing to help you be better at your demanding job, what would it be?” The responses were nearly unanimous: More time. The keynote speaker replied, “Well, I’m sorry to tell you, that there is only ever 24-hours in a day. We can fly to the moon, but we can never make more time.” “Busyness is an illness of spirit,” as Eugene Peterson has said.³ And yet we are addicted to it. Our society is ill.

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This morning’s message on the command to observe the Sabbath day and keep it set apart as a special day to God is placed out in the air in front of me with a certain seriousness, because I’m preaching this message to myself as well. I am a part of the hearing congregation in all of my messages; but I felt this week as if I too was being tapped on the shoulder a little bit more. The potential for that illness of spirit is there to threaten all of us. So it is no wonder that it pops us as a kind of divine safeguard in God’s 10 Commandments to his people as they begin to define themselves as a nation. In those early days it was, among other things, a weekly celebration of their rescue from slavery in Egypt. Quite literally, Sabbath is a Hebrew noun meaning day of rest. Imagine if you had been a slave, always being told what to do, under yoke and hammer, having even to get permission to go to the bathroom. You would have paid anything for a day off, for freedom. Now they had it. And they held onto it with dear life.

But it was also a profound comment on how God had creatively crafted the ordering of his precious world. Since Lord Almighty created the world in six days—and by the way, this isn’t a Sunday to debate creation theory because it’s beside the point—since God created the world in six days and then rested on the seventh, so too should his people rest on the seventh, which was Saturday. As the command goes on to say, “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.” He consecrated it; meaning he made it unlike other days, different, and holy, for rest. *Unlike* other days. Different. Special. For renewal.

Today I focus on four elements of God’s plan for our continued renewal. I won’t lament the rise of Sunday Shopping, or how as parents it became harder to figure out what to do when leagues started to hold hockey practices and tournaments on Sundays. Rather, I will stress elements that I think are less talked about emphases in a command whose heart is to lift us up on eagle’s wings.

And I should also quickly mention a technicality. As I just mentioned, the Sabbath day was originally Saturday. Saturday is the seventh day. Sunday is the first day of the week. This is a gross oversimplification, but in the early days of the church, Christians began to gather in church on Sundays instead of gathering in synagogue on Saturdays because Jesus had risen from the grave on a Sunday: that was the defining element of their existence, so they wanted to mark it in a special day. Plus, the two groups weren’t getting along all that well, so those who confessed that Jesus was the Messiah wanted to define themselves over and against their Jewish brothers and sisters. So, Sunday it became.

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First, *the Sabbath is a faith issue*. It is about trusting that God can provide for your life; and that you don't have to cram that last day with things to do yourself, because you don't trust God can do it otherwise. But the warning against this is pretty direct, right from Scripture: "For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day." In other words, if God did all that in six days, you can too. Do we trust him to care for us? Or conversely, would we rather leave it all up to us, and leave God out of the picture? It's a trust issue. And if this idea—that it is fundamentally about trust—bothers you, it should. If it wasn't important, it wouldn't be a commandment.

Second, *the Sabbath is not necessarily fixed to a specific day*. And I say this not to make it easier on us. Early in our Christian tradition, one modification was already made by moving our understanding of Sabbath to Sunday—the day of worship and rest. I say that the Sabbath is not necessarily fixed to a specific day because of something Jesus said; and we are wise to remember that Christ is always the perfect interpreter of the commandments. We all know the words. This is what he said: "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest." Our true Sabbath is Christ himself. Not limited to a day, but to a person.

Through the most recent generations this has been a controversial one. But the words of Christ that he himself is our rest, helps us with a practical way forward, I think, for those who truly struggle with this issue especially when they are assigned shift work on Sundays, or when they are on call, or when they are caring for a loved one who doesn't even know or care what day it is. (Or when they're a minister and always have responsibilities on Sunday.) Although Sunday is the *norm* for our Sabbath, for those for whom it is a real struggle, Christ invites us to find our rest in him when we are able to come to him. If it isn't Sunday, then we find other time.

Third, in verse 10 we are told that the Sabbath is a rest not just in general, but with a specific purpose: "to the LORD." I am reminded about a cartoon I saw on the internet this week: Two kids are walking down the street nonchalantly. One says to the other, "Our grandfathers called it the Sabbath; our dads called it Sunday; we call it the weekend." But in that third move, from Sabbath to Sunday to weekend, something is lost. *It's those three words, "to the Lord."* Rest itself isn't renewing enough. I recently drove past a billboard in Toronto on the Gardner Expressway that was advertising some sort of radio program on Sunday mornings. The caption read, "What else are you doing on Sunday morning?" I felt like yelling out, "Worshipping God, you idiots!" But I felt that wasn't becoming for a man of the cloth. So I just thought it instead!

It's not just about rest. It is re-centring in God and Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit in worship with other believers. It is prayer. It is going for a walk to be reminded that creation is good, and that we, as living, fragile, human beings, are a part of it.

Through the ages, some have taken this to an extreme, however. Richard Baxter, whom I greatly respect, and who tried to help Christians in the 1600's know what to do with the Sabbath, wrote: "rise early on Sunday morning; pray in private; have family devotions; go to church (and do not sleep in church); after returning home, while the noon meal is being prepared, pray in private and review everything said in church; enjoy a festive meal with conversation about the love of our Redeemer or something fitting for Sunday; after the meal, gather as family for a psalm or for singing and instruction; go to church once more; come home and gather as family to call upon God in prayer and song and to rehearse the sermon; thereafter eat, but not too much, just as at noon; after the evening meal, question the children and servants about what they had learned during the day; sing a psalm and conclude with prayer; and end the day with holy thoughts."⁴ Perhaps his thought is in the right place. But that doesn't sound all that restful! Rabbi Heschel says it like this: "The higher goal of spiritual living is not to amass a wealth of information, but to face sacred moments." Sabbath rest without God is not Sabbath. It's a weekend.

Lastly, the recitation of the commandments do not only appear as we have been reading them in Exodus 20. They appear in other places. And sometimes God repeats them at key moments, often when he feels his

people need extra reminding that this is not only just something for renewal, but something which binds God's people to their Creator. One of those times later in the book of Exodus when he is speaking to Moses. And I offer you the translation of Hebrew scholar Robert Alter: "Between Me and the Israelites it is a sign for all time that six days did the LORD make heaven and earth and on the seventh day He ceased and caught His breath." *He ceased and caught His breath.* Lord Almighty: He ceased and caught His breath. It is a limit-pushing image that Lord Almighty would cease and then "catch His breath," like someone worked to exhaustion and needing a massive intake of oxygen to prevent their system from collapsing. That gasp, filling our lungs, ready for another day—that gasp, without which our best can never even surface.

When we think of the word Christian, some of the words that have come to be associated with it is: disciple, commitment, service, hope, worship, dedication. And if I could, I would invite all of you very close to me right now. And we would all sit in a little semi-circle around Scripture and put our ears to it and listen to a living word from God to us today in this chaotic and modern world, and hear, ever so gently, one of its best kept secret. It is a secret that I long to hear just as much as you, from a God who ceases and catches his breath, or who at least speaks of himself that way to tell us something. The proposal is for another word associated with that title Christian. Another one added to the list that might just surprise those, including ourselves, often threatened with that illness of spirit. Let's add it to the list because, like any secret, it's already there. The word is *Refreshed*.

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About thirty years ago the first in a series of movies was released, entitled *The Gods Must Be Crazy*—a clever comedy yet with profound messages. One of the stories in the movie is about an African tribe that lives in the Kalahari Desert in the southern part of the continent. The tribe lives well in its work, play, and prosperity. This life is attributed to the favour from the gods from above.

However, one day a glass bottle is thrown from an airplane and falls unbroken to the ground. In the movie, the bottle is found among the tribe. Initially, the bottle is seen as a gift from the gods, albeit a strange artefact. However, it quickly becomes a tool in the tribe. The bottle is used in cooking, working, and even play. Nonetheless, this tool becomes a temptation. Since there is only one bottle to go around, there begins competition for use of this tool. This leads to difficult experiences for the tribe. They succumb to moments of envy, jealousy, anger, enmity, and even violence. The tool becomes an evil thing. Their community of grace is threatened with turmoil and trouble.

The protagonist in the movie, Xi, offers to take the evil thing and throw it off the edge of the earth. Xi sets off on a quest. With bottle in hand, he is exposed to more of Western culture than just a glass container. One sees his experiences and observations from his viewpoint. Xi learns a number of lessons about the outside world, himself and his tribe. But Xi eventually returns from his quest. Yes, he is illumined about the Western world.⁵ But you get the sense that there is a feeling of lament that not just "good thinking," but "good being," that soul-wellness and perfect order was disrupted was disrupted by something—you know what it is: that bottle that fell from the sky to mess it all up.

In our world, something is messed up. And who knows what the bottle is. But it came, and we wanted it: something to make us more efficient; or happier (or so we thought); or more sophisticated. But in our rush to master the world, we often forget that the true blessing *is already here* in our midst in the order and seven-day week we have been given. All that said, it's a blessing to see you here this morning—in the words of Rabbi Heschel, and in the Spirit of Christ, it's a blessing to see you "making sacred moments." Remembering Sabbath.

Friends, Peace be with you
Congregation: And also with you
 Exactly.

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¹ Carl Honore, *In Praise of Slow: How a Worldwide Movement is Challenging the Cult of Speed* (Toronto: Vintage, 2004), 246-48.

² Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath: It's Meaning for Modern Man* (New York: Farrar, 1961), 76.

³ Eugene Peterson, *Five Smooth Stones for Pastoral Work* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 55.

⁴ Richard Baxter, *The Practical Works of Richard Baxter* (reprint, Ligonier, Pa., 1990), 1:472-73.

⁵ The movie was released in 1980 and was written and directed by James Uys. Here I retell and modify its narration by Richard Aguilar in a message titled "To Build A Community of Grace," posted on day1.org on September 4, 2011.