

“Busier Than God?”  
Sermon Preached by David D. Colby  
Central Presbyterian Church  
May 18, 2008  
Scripture: Genesis 1:1–2:4a

In the beginning, everything was all right. In the beginning, everything was good. From the very beginning, it is a beautiful story, with a cadence that suggests order and meaning, purpose and balance.

In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night.” (Gen 1:1-5).

And then comes the first of what becomes a refrain in the creation story. “And there was evening and there was morning, the first day” (Gen 1:5). Acts of creation happen at the instigation of God’s word - God speaks, and creation happens - and the acts are ordered and distinguished with this phrase. “And there was evening and there was morning, the second day.” “And there was evening and there was morning, the third day.”

Now I should say up front that I do not believe this is meant to be a literal scientific explanation of how God created the world. There is a museum that opened in Kentucky last year that cost \$27 million dollars to build. It is called the Creation Museum, and is intended to promote the theory that creation took place in six 24-hour days about six thousand years ago. This way families can take their children to this museum rather than, say, our Science Museum of Minnesota here in St. Paul that would have placards describing dinosaurs that roamed the earth millions of years ago. The Creation Museum was built by those who believe that science and Christian faith are mortal enemies.<sup>1</sup>

I love this story from Genesis and think that it contains theological truth. But I do not believe it was ever meant to be taken literally as scientific fact. The fact that immediately following this story in Genesis there is a second story that tells, in a very different way, a story of God creating the world – with a different order of events suggests that the Bible never meant for it to be taken as the only factual truth of how the world began.

There are some questions that the Bible does not try to answer. A colleague of mine, a good Southern Methodist minister who grew up in a very religious family, said that as an early teenager he read the Bible cover to cover, trying to find an answer to a pressing question. He searched and search for an answer to his teenage obsession: Can I kiss on a first date? The Bible doesn’t provide an answer, or even ask the question. There are some questions that the Bible does not try to answer.

Our story does not try to answer the question of how old the earth is. It is an introduction, the beginning of the Bible, and it tells of God's grand plan. The refrain itself suggests poetry and purpose telescoped, with words that foreshadow what is to come.

Back to the story. "At every juncture in the creation story," Wayne Mueller writes, "God acts, steps back, and rests."<sup>2</sup> The story nears a climax when "God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day" (Gen 1:31). And then, in chapter two, we hear the point of the story,

Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude. And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation (Gen 2:1-3).

Bible scholars suggest that the Hebrew Scriptures contain four recognizable strands of material that have been edited into final form. That is why, for example, there are two different creation stories placed back to back. I said earlier that there are some questions the Bible does not attempt to answer. But this story, I believe, does try to answer this question: why do we rest on the Sabbath? This story is widely considered to be from the Priestly strand, known for its concern about the temple and religious rituals. Leave it to the priests, the looking out for self-preservation and institutional maintenance, to emphasize this commandment above all others as at the center of the very act of creation itself!

The commandment to observe the Sabbath, even the word Sabbath itself, brings back for memories of the stories of Laura Ingalls Wilder in Little House on the Prairie series of dull Sundays spent sitting rigidly in the parlor, and of Tom Sawyer begging for excitement. Honor the Sabbath – not that long ago, fifty years here in America, you couldn't go to a movie on Sunday, or go shopping, or even fill your car up with gas. Sunday was a day for rest – even for lowly employees. Those days are long past. Many of us work on Sundays – business must go on.

The concept of Sabbath seems a quaint relic of the past. I told you a while ago about an author named A.J. Jacob, who tried to follow the Bible literally for a year and write about his experiences in a book he called The Year of Living Biblically. He tried to follow all the rules in the Bible – the big ones, and the ones that are less well-known – like not wearing clothing made of different fibers. Observing the Sabbath is a big one, one of the ten commandments (Ex. 20:8), but was daunting for him. He asked

In the post-BlackBerry age, is there really a boundary between the weekday and the weekend, between work hours and overtime? We work on Saturday, the Jewish Shabbat. We work on Sunday, the Christian Sabbath. We put in more hours than the God of Genesis himself.<sup>3</sup>

Many of you who work know what he is talking about. I have heard your stories about family vacations driving through the mountains when at every peak your BlackBerry goes off like crazy – a crisis at work needs your attention. You have told me that you go to the gym at 5:30 in the morning because it is the only time you will have all day between work and family

obligations. I know some of you who, the last thing you do before going to sleep is to check email, and the first thing you do after waking up is to check email. I have tried to reach some of you at work only to find messages that state something like, “I will be on vacation this week, but if you need to reach me, I will be checking email periodically.” Those of you who have retired cannot imagine the sand-proof, water-proof laptop computers that are needed to go to the beach and up to the mountains.

I want to admit up front that I am preaching, not just “to the choir” as the expression goes – they apparently heeded this sermon in advance and took the Sunday off. I will acknowledge that I am preaching also to myself. When I was in Delaware, I worked on a staff of workaholics in a town of business executives. On the rare occasions one of our salaried staff would leave the office at five o’clock, we would only partly-jokingly say, “half day today?” There are staff members here who I refuse to send email to while they are on vacation, because I know they will read it and think about work. We live in a time when there is not a boundary between work hours and non-work hours. We live in a time when jobs security is fragile, and there is increased pressure to not use our full allotment of vacation time. We are defined by our work, and lost without it.

What makes us work longer days, multiple jobs, and skip vacations? Certainly our economy presents opportunities to make money now and great uncertainty about the future. What is it that makes us work longer hours than ever? With email and Blackberries and facebook, is it an addiction to being in constant communication? Is it a fear that if we slow down or take a day off that we will be forgotten at the office and passed over for promotions? With our “to-do” lists getting longer and longer do we think that we are busier than God?

There has been a rediscovery of Sabbath. And not just theologians are writing and urging Sabbath rhythms for life. I read about Sabbath in the businesses pages of major newspapers. More and more people, from different angles and outlooks are encouraging us to slow down as a society, to reorganize priorities, to find balance. Now is a time, as the Apostle Paul puts it in his closing remarks to the Corinthian church, “to put things in order . . . agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you” (2 Cor 13:11).

But even for those with good intentions, it is not easy to reclaim the Sabbath. A.J. Jacobs, the author of The Year of Living Biblically, decided to try to observe the Sabbath. The way he describes his attempt shows the power of technology’s grasp, a human ability for self-justification, and how interwoven our work and personal lives are. And he is funny.

Unlike the rabbis, the Bible itself gives few detailed instructions on how exactly to refrain from work. And the ones it does give apply only [he writes] to farmers and reality-show contestants: no kindling of fire, no gathering sticks, no plowing or harvesting.

So I have to figure this one out myself. Since my work is writing, I decide I need to abstain from writing, of course. But also researching, phoning colleagues, and scouting the newspaper for ideas. The thing is, going cold turkey terrifies me. . . .

The first week, I told myself: no checking of email. I lasted all of an hour, after which I told myself, well, I won't open the emails themselves. I'll just scan the subject headers. That doesn't count as working. So I clicked on the mail. Hmm. An email from my mom. The Bible does say to respect your parents. And maybe it's urgent. . . I clicked on it. It's a joke about five blondes and a blind man in a bar.<sup>4</sup>

It is not easy to pause, to stop, to observe the Sabbath. It is incredibly counter-cultural. But, I believe, our spiritual and physical health depends upon it. I will even go so far as to suggest that the health of all creation is dependent upon relearning Sabbath rhythms.

In the beginning, out of chaos, God created everything, and saw that it was good. This week it has felt like creation has been under attack by chaos. There were one hundred and one confirmed tornadoes in the United States in the span of eight days, killing twenty-five people.<sup>5</sup> An earthquake in China that killed thousands. A cyclone in Burma and resulting floods killing more than a hundred thousand, with thousands more at risk without food or safe drinking water.

Humans should certainly bear some of the blame for these natural disasters. Schools in China that collapsed at a much higher rate than our buildings, killing children in a place they should have been safe. The military junta in Myanmar has refused aid, even barring relief flights from entering the country.

What does it mean, today, to exercise dominion – stewardship over all creation? We need to recover, I believe, a balance for the world, and for our lives. A balance in which the highest goal is not work productivity. The highest goal is not efficiency. The highest goal is not accumulating wealth. “There is more to life than merely increasing its speed,” said Gandhi.<sup>6</sup> “Consider the lilies,” says Jesus (Matt 6:28). “Remember the Sabbath Day and keep it holy,” states the 4<sup>th</sup> commandment (Ex 20:8). We need a balance between creation and rest.

Throughout the Bible there is a concern for such a balance. Crops are to be rotated. Land can be bought and sold, but at periodic intervals must be returned to its ancestral homes. And the lives of faithful people are balanced between work and family and worship and rest. Finding balance is not easy.

We need to remember that we are not God. We are not God, and that is good. And if God can rest and rejoice, so can we. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> See [www.creationmuseum.org](http://www.creationmuseum.org) for the museum's website. For Jason Byasee's review of the museum in The Christian Century, “Dinosaurs in the Garden: A Visit to the Creation Museum” see [www.christiancentury.org/article.lasso?id=4350](http://www.christiancentury.org/article.lasso?id=4350)

<sup>2</sup> Wayne Mueller, Sabbath: Finding Rest, Renewal, And Delight in our Busy Lives (New York: Bantam Books, 1999) 40.

<sup>3</sup> A.J. Jacobs, The Year of Living Biblically: One Man's Humble Quest to Follow the Bible as Literally as Possible (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2007) 71.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>5</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/May\\_2008\\_tornado\\_outbreak\\_sequence](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/May_2008_tornado_outbreak_sequence)

<sup>6</sup> Mueller, 17.