

Summer 2016

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Recommended Citation

Schifferdecker, Kathryn M., "Sabbath and Creation" (2016). *Faculty Publications*. 164.

http://digitalcommons.luthersem.edu/faculty_articles/164

Published Citation

Schifferdecker, Kathryn M. "Sabbath and Creation." *Word & World* 36, no. 3 (2016): 209–18.



Sabbath and Creation

KATHRYN SCHIFFERDECKER

*To rest, we must accept Nature's limits and our own. When we come to our limit, we must be still.*¹

I grew up in the land of Walmart. In those days (the 1970s and 1980s) in southern Missouri, not far from the Arkansas border, many small towns had a Walmart, including my hometown, Farmington. There were Walmarts in several of the towns that surrounded us, five stores in a twenty-five mile radius. Of course, when I was growing up, these were not the Walmart “Supercenters” of today—open twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year—with full grocery stores, auto repair shops, garden centers, and pharmacies included. These were relatively modest shopping centers, open during waking hours with a somewhat limited variety of goods and services. Nevertheless, our local family-owned stores had a hard time competing against Walmart and, as happened in many small towns, some of these smaller stores closed because of it.

My grandfather, a devout Lutheran and a milkman by trade, refused to shop at Walmart. He did so not out of loyalty (though he was friends with many of the

¹Wendell Berry, *This Day: Collected and New Sabbath Poems 1979–2012* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2014) xxiii. Berry is a Kentucky farmer, poet, essayist, and “bad-weather churchgoer” who has thought long and fruitfully about Sabbath and the land, often during walks on Sunday mornings through his local woodlands (hence the title of his book). My article benefits from being in conversation with Berry’s writing, particularly his poetry.

Work and rest, planting and letting lie fallow—these are the rhythms by which both we and the earth are sustained, as on creation’s first Sabbath. “Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy. . . . Six days you shall do your work, but on the seventh day you shall rest.” It is, of course, a word of law. For those who have ears to hear, however, it is also a word of promise.

local business people) but out of religious conviction. His ethics grew out of his study of Scripture. Accordingly, he invoked Isa 5:8 against Walmart:

Woe to you who join house to house,
who add field to field,
until there is room for no one but you,
and you are left to live alone in the midst of the land!

Grandpa knew Scripture. He studied it every day and he recognized in Scripture a certain attitude of restraint, a call for an intentional self-limiting of human striving and of human ambition. That biblical theme of intentional restraint is best expressed in the principle of Sabbath:

Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. 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. (Exod 20:8–11)

This Exodus version of the Sabbath commandment grounds the observance of the Sabbath in the first creation story of Gen 1–2.²

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 2:2–3)

After all the work of creation, God stopped and God rested (the root meaning of the word *shabbat/sabbath*). And because God rested on the Sabbath, we human beings, who are created in the image of God, must also rest. The Sabbath day is a remembrance and a reenactment of that first primeval day of rest. Sabbath, according to the biblical text, is built into the rhythm of creation itself and so it touches all aspects of life, most particularly humanity's relationship with the rest of the created order. It is that relationship, in particular, that this article explores. It may be that those who today seek to live wisely on the earth would do well to reconsider Sabbath.

SABBATH FOR PEOPLE

The Sabbath commandment in Exod 20 is enjoined not just on heads of households, but on their families, their slaves, their livestock, and the foreigners who live among them. That is, the Sabbath is a day of rest not only for the wealthy class or for the patriarchs; it is a day of rest for those who need it most—those who

²The Deuteronomy version of the Sabbath commandment, as my colleague Rolf Jacobson discusses elsewhere in this issue of *Word & World* (pp. 219–227), is grounded in the exodus from Egypt: “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” (Deut 5:15).

do physical work for six days of the week: manual laborers, foreign workers, and slaves. Even livestock are included in the Sabbath. The donkey and the ox can spend a day without bridle or yoke, grazing or dozing to their heart's content.

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The laws of Exodus in their literary context are addressed to former slaves who had no experience of rest in the imperial economy that was ancient Egypt. To build the monumental architecture that marked ancient Egypt, human labor and human lives were burned up like so much chattel. Freed from this dehumanizing bondage at last, the former slaves at the foot of Sinai are commanded to rest and to allow those under their authority to rest, so that they do not replicate the oppression they left behind.

The Sabbath commandment, then, acts as a refutation to the brutality of imperial Egypt. The Sabbath commandment also acts as a safeguard against Israel's own propensity to become enslaved again—this time to their own ambition and fear. Sabbath calls for radical trust in the God who provides. The theology behind it goes something like this: You do not need to work seven days a week. You are not God. God rested; so surely you can rest, too. God will provide what you need. Stop. Be still. And trust.

SABBATH FOR THE LAND

Sabbath is given as a gift to people of all stations in life and even to livestock. What is perhaps even more striking is that a few chapters later in Exodus, Sabbath is extended also to the land itself:

For six years you shall sow your land and gather in its yield; but the seventh year you shall let it rest and lie fallow, so that the poor of your people may eat; and what they leave the wild animals may eat. You shall do the same with your vineyard, and with your olive orchard. (Exod 23:10–11)

The connection with the Sabbath day is obvious, but just in case the reader/hearer misses it, the Sabbath commandment is reiterated immediately after this injunction:

Six days you shall do your work, but on the seventh day you shall rest, so that your ox and your donkey may have relief, and your homeborn slave and the resident alien may be refreshed. (Exod 23:12)

This extension of the Sabbath commandment to the land itself is an extension also of the radical trust that the Sabbath requires. God will provide on the seventh day. God will also provide in the seventh year, from the harvest of the previous six years and from what the land produces on its own.

The sabbatical year, which provides rest for the land as well as its inhabitants, points to a holistic understanding of the relationship between humanity and the earth. Human beings are created as flesh-and-blood creatures who require periodic rest. Humans are not automatons. The land, too, cannot produce endlessly. It requires a regular fallow time, when it naturally regenerates itself, when plant matter decays and returns its nutrients to the soil. Otherwise, the land's soil and nutrients are stripped away, so that it can no longer feed its people. Good farmers have always known this truth.

One of those good farmers, essayist and poet Wendell Berry, offers wise advice to a would-be farmer, based on this concept of a Sabbath for the land:

Where you grew corn last year,
Sow buckwheat, let it seed,
Then disk it in and grow
A second crop to disk in.
This is for humus, and
To keep out weeds. It is
A Sabbath for the land,
Rest and enrichment, good
For it, for you, for all
The ones who are unborn;
The land must have its Sabbath
Or take it when we starve.³

JUBILEE : A SABBATH OF SABBATHS

The correspondence between people and land continues in the Jubilee laws of Lev 25. The chapter begins with a reiteration of the law of the Sabbath year for the land: "When you enter the land that I am giving you, the land shall observe a sabbath for the LORD. Six years you shall sow your field...but in the seventh year there shall be a sabbath of complete rest for the land, a sabbath for the LORD" (Lev 25:2–3a, 4a). As in Exodus, the Sabbath year in Leviticus is understood as a remembrance and reenactment of God's resting on the seventh day of creation. "During this time there is to be neither sowing nor pruning, for the land, like God and God's creatures, must be returned to the freedom from toil that it enjoyed on creation's first Sabbath."⁴

The text goes on to describe a Sabbath of Sabbaths, the Jubilee:

You shall count off seven weeks of years, seven times seven years, so that the period of seven weeks of years gives forty-nine years. Then you shall have the trumpet sounded loud. . . . And you shall hallow the fiftieth year and you shall proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you: you shall return, every one of you, to your property and every one of you to your family. That fiftieth year shall be a jubilee for you: you shall not

³Berry, "The Farm," in *This Day*, 117–118.

⁴Samuel Balentine, *Leviticus* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2003) 194.

sow, or reap the aftergrowth, or harvest the unpruned vines. For it is a jubilee; it shall be holy to you: you shall eat only what the field itself produces. (Lev 25:8–9a, 10–12)

Jubilee is about giving the land its Sabbath, just as in the sabbatical year. But it is about more than that. Jubilee is about coming home. If an Israelite has to sell his property because of debt (occasioned probably by a bad crop or by illness), his land must be redeemed by his nearest male relative (the *go'el* or “redeemer”). Even if the debtor has no one to redeem his land, it will be returned to him or to his descendants in the Jubilee year. When he sells his land, therefore, he is in reality selling only a certain number of harvests, not the land itself (Lev 25:14–17). The land, a gift from God, cannot be sold because it does not belong to Israel in the first place. It belongs to God. “The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants” (Lev 25:23).

The land, a gift from God, cannot be sold because it does not belong to Israel in the first place. It belongs to God.

In direct correlation to the land, the people of Israel themselves cannot be sold into slavery forever. If they fall into debt, they can sell themselves or their children as indentured servants, but their redeemer (*go'el*) must redeem them from that servitude (if their creditor is a non-Israelite), or they can earn wages for their service and redeem themselves (Lev 25:47–55). In any case, whether serving an Israelite or a non-Israelite, the debtors are indentured servants only until the Jubilee, when they are set free. “You shall not make them serve as slaves. They shall remain with you as hired or bound laborers. They shall serve with you until the year of the jubilee. Then they and their children with them shall be free from your authority; they shall go back to their own family and return to their ancestral property” (Lev 25:39b–41).⁵

The people, like the land, cannot be sold into slavery because they, like the land, belong to God. “For they are my slaves, whom I brought out of the land of Egypt; they shall not be sold as slaves are sold” (Lev 25:42).⁶ The Israelites are God’s slaves; they cannot serve anyone else. Freed from slavery in Egypt, the Israelites cannot fall back into human slavery. Now they serve only God. The land, too, be-

⁵This law of the Jubilee year may be deliberately revising the law of the sabbatical year of release described in Exod 21:2–6 (cf. Deut 15:12–18). According to Exodus, a Hebrew slave is to be released in the seventh year of his service. This law, however, also allows for the institution of permanent slavery, should the Hebrew slave wish to remain with his wife and children who belong to his master. The Jubilee law abolishes all permanent slavery of Israelites and, further, provides for their homecoming to their ancestral land which is also released in the Jubilee. It is probably also the case that the Israelite indentured servant can work to pay off his debt before the Jubilee. If the creditor is a non-Israelite, the redeemer must redeem the person immediately (Lev 25:47–55). For more on this topic, see Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2004) 298–307.

⁶The NRSV translates, “For they are my servants...” but the more accurate translation is “slaves.” The Hebrew word for “slave” and “servant” are the same (*eved*).

longs to God and therefore cannot belong permanently to anyone else. “Neither farmer nor field is finally eligible for sale.”⁷

The land belongs to God. The people belong to God. And God gives Sabbath as a gift to both land and people. Jubilee, the Sabbath of Sabbaths, ensures that no one in Israel can become destitute forever, and that no one in Israel can become rich forever. The gap between rich and poor cannot become too wide. Jubilee also means that no one is left without land and the means to provide for themselves and their families. Jubilee is not about charity; it is about justice.

*if the people will not observe Sabbath, if they will not let
the land observe Sabbath, then the people will be removed
from the land and the land will finally have its rest*

The land belongs to God. The people belong to God. And God gives the land to Israel as a gift, but that gift has conditions. Leviticus 26 lists the rewards for obedience to God’s commands, including the Sabbath commandment: “I will give you your rains in their season, and the land shall yield its produce. . . . And I will grant peace in the land, and you shall lie down, and no one shall make you afraid” (Lev 26:4a, 6a). On the other hand, if the Israelites do not obey God’s commands (and there are certainly economic reasons for the wealthy not to observe the Sabbath or Jubilee laws), they will suffer the consequences. Their land will not yield its produce, and the people will eventually go into exile:

Then the land shall enjoy [or “make up for”] its sabbath years as long as it lies desolate, while you are in the land of your enemies; then the land shall rest, and enjoy its sabbath years. As long as it lies desolate, it shall have the rest it did not have on your sabbaths when you were living on it. (Lev 26:34–35)

The land and the people are intimately tied to one another. If the people will not observe Sabbath, if they will not let the land observe Sabbath, then the people will be removed from the land and the land will finally have its rest. To Wendell Berry and other thoughtful observers of modern agricultural and industrial practices, the text is not so much a threat as a description of reality:

From the biblical point of view, the earth and our earthly livelihood are conditional gifts. We may possess the land given to us, that we are given to, only by remembering our intimate kinship with it. The condition of the people is indistinguishable ultimately from the condition of the land. Work that destroys the land, diminishing its ability to support life, is a great evil for which sooner or later the punishment is homelessness, hunger, and thirst. For some, the context of this thinking has shifted from religion to science, but the understanding of the land as a conditional gift has not changed.⁸

⁷Ellen Davis, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009) 94. Davis’s book is an insightful study of the understanding of land in Scripture, including a perceptive discussion of the theology of Sabbath. She also writes about the analogy between people and land in Leviticus (90–94).

⁸Berry, *This Day*, xxii.

In a world where fertile cropland is being lost every year to urban expansion and desertification, where studies show an alarming rate of topsoil loss (the fertile soil on which animal and human life depends), we would do well to heed such a warning.⁹

MATTER MATTERS

When I teach the legal codes of Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy (including the commandments about Sabbath) to my students, I tell them this: “Matter matters. Matter matters to God and it should matter to us. Bodies matter. Soil matters. God cares about such things.”

Of course, we Christians should know this even without the legal codes of the Pentateuch. Many Christian doctrines point to this truth, that God cares about matter. Our doctrines about creation, redemption, incarnation, and resurrection all testify to this theological claim. Matter matters.

But the legal codes of the Pentateuch, and especially those laws connected to the Sabbath, are particularly pertinent to our current historical moment. If Sabbath is, at least in part, about intentional self-restraint, about knowing our limits and abiding by them, then we are today breaking the Sabbath commandment with an enthusiasm rarely seen before in the world’s history. Consider this: humanity is now considered by some scientists a geological force in its own right. Environmental scientist Calvin DeWitt explains why:

Our species, in contrast with every other, affects biospheric dynamics on a grand and pervasive scale. In our day we find, remarkably, that *we have become a principal geological force*. We find ourselves to have significantly restructured the biosphere both biogeographically and trophically. Climate change now pushes plant and animal ranges 3.8 miles pole-ward each decade, nearly one-third of the earth’s arable land has been lost to erosion, biodiversity is seriously threatened by habitat destruction and toxification, and overexploitation has brought collapse of the world’s major fisheries and an adverse restructuring of ocean food webs. Earth is now under human domination.¹⁰

We human beings have become a force to be reckoned with. We have taken very seriously the command to “fill the earth and subdue it,” but we have done so to the detriment of most other species on earth and, ultimately, to our own detriment.

The root causes of this state of affairs are complex. I would point to another Christian doctrine, the doctrine of original sin, as explaining the core problem. More specifically, though, it seems to me that one reason we have arrived at this point in our history is that we have forgotten Sabbath and the deliberate

⁹There are many scientific studies that testify to the unsustainable rate at which the world is losing its topsoil. For one succinct description, see the 2006 Cornell University study here: <http://www.news.cornell.edu/stories/2006/03/slow-insidious-soil-erosion-threatens-human-health-and-welfare> (accessed April 4, 2016).

¹⁰Calvin DeWitt, *Earth-Wise: A Biblical Response to Environmental Issues*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Faith Alive Resources, 2007) 38. Emphasis added.

self-restraint and limits on human greed that Sabbath entails. We have forgotten our right relationship to the rest of God's creation. We have forgotten that the land does not belong to us; that, indeed, both we and the land belong to God.

Bob Dylan was right: "You're gonna have to serve somebody."¹¹ If we will not serve God, then we will enslave ourselves to something else—ambition, materialism, and the endless striving for more. Wendell Berry reveals the irony of such enslavement:

We who prayed and wept
for liberty from kings
and the yoke of liberty
accept the tyranny of things
we do not need.
In plenitude too free,
we have become adept
beneath the yoke of greed.¹²

As I write this essay, I watch a house being built at a rapid pace on the shores of the lake near which we live. The decades-old modest fishing cottages that once populated the lakeshore are being torn down, one by one, and replaced by large houses with multi-stall garages, houses that stand cheek by jowl with one another, each vying for its allotment of shoreline. A mile away, a new housing development is going up in what was a farm field, consuming arable land and the neighboring trees that until recently provided habitat for deer, foxes, and other wildlife. This scene is, of course, played out every day in multiple cities and towns and neighborhoods across the US, and it is just one small example of our inability to know our limits, our unwillingness to keep Sabbath and to let the land keep Sabbath. It is one small example of our culture's obsession with "more," and the concomitant need to work longer hours in order to acquire more. We are laboring under "the yoke of greed"¹³ and we have put the yoke on our own necks. We cannot keep Sabbath or the world might pass us by. We cannot keep Sabbath and the earth itself suffers because of it.

In the name of more we destroy
for coal the mountain and its forest
and so choose the insatiable flame
over the green leaf that within our care
would return to us unendingly
until the end of time.¹⁴

¹¹Bob Dylan, "Gotta Serve Somebody," from *Slow Train Coming* (1979).

¹²Wendell Berry, "We Who Prayed and Wept," in *Collected Poems 1957–1982* (New York: North Point Press, 1985) 211. For the whole poem, see <http://grist.org/article/a-wendell-berry-poem-for-wednesday> (accessed April 4, 2016).

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Wendell Berry, "2008, II," in *This Day*, 316.

SABBATH AS GRACE

To this situation of restlessness and constant striving, the Sabbath commandment says, “Enough.” It is a word of law that addresses our insatiable appetite for finite resources of land, water, minerals, and animals. It is a word of law, indeed, but it is also a word of liberation and hope for those caught in the endless cycle of acquiring more and more stuff. Sabbath laws and, in particular, the vision of the Jubilee year, hold up for our attention the value of community, the value of everyone having enough, the value of trusting God to provide, the value of matter (both bodies and soil), and the value of rest.

rest, true Sabbath rest, is a gift, a gift that we need perhaps more than we know, a gift that our neighbors and our world most certainly need

It is a word of grace to a culture obsessed with acquiring more and more stuff. It is a word of grace to those who fall asleep to the glow of their screens and, waking, reach for them before they attend to the needs of the day. Rest, true Sabbath rest, is a gift, a gift that we need perhaps more than we know, a gift that our neighbors and our world most certainly need.

My grandfather’s disdain for Walmart and everything that it represented grew out of his study of the prophet Isaiah. The words of the prophet continue to ring in our ears today:

Woe to you who join house to house, who add field to field,
until there is room for no one but you,
and you are left to live alone in the midst of the land! (Isa 5:8)

The good news is this: such loneliness is neither necessary nor inevitable. According to the biblical witness, God gives gifts to God’s beloved people. Among these gifts, Sabbath is given to remind us of our identity as God’s own, and the world as God’s own. The Jewish community has, of course, been much better than the Christian community at recognizing that gift of Sabbath.

One Jewish legend has it that even those who do not keep Sabbath in this world will do so in the world to come. The rabbis tell of a necromancer who calls up his dead father from the grave every day for a week. Every day his father comes up; every day, that is, except Sabbath. The necromancer says, “Father, did you become a Jew after you died? Why did you come up every day of the week but not on the Sabbath?”

His father responds, “Anyone among you [the living] who does not keep the Sabbath of his own free will must keep it here in spite of himself.”

“But what toil do you have there?”

“Every day of the week we endure judgment, but on the Sabbath we rest.”¹⁵

¹⁵Genesis Rabbah XI:5.

The legend speaks of Sabbath as grace, even in hell. The biblical witness speaks of Sabbath as grace, even in the midst of the human sin that stains this creation that God loves so much. And so we pray for the wisdom to recognize that grace, and by it, to know again the world as God created it:

The world as it was given for love's sake,
The world by love and loving work revealed¹⁶

Work and rest, planting and letting lie fallow—these are the rhythms by which both we and the earth are sustained, as on creation's first Sabbath. "Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy. . . . Six days you shall do your work, but on the seventh day *you shall rest*."¹⁷ It is, of course, a word of law. For those who have ears to hear, however, it is also a word of promise. ⊕

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¹⁶Berry, "1979: VII," in *This Day*, 16.

¹⁷Exod 20:8; 23:12. Emphasis added.