

This Day Is Holy
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January 24, 2016

Nehemiah 8:1, 3, 5-6, 8-10

¹All the people gathered together into the square before the Water Gate. They told the scribe Ezra to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the Lord had given to Israel. ³He read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law. ⁵And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was standing above all the people; and when he opened it, all the people stood up. ⁶Then Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God, and all the people answered, ‘Amen, Amen’, lifting up their hands. Then they bowed their heads and worshipped the Lord with their faces to the ground. ⁸So they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.

⁹ And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, ‘This day is holy to the Lord your God; do not mourn or weep.’ For all the people wept when they heard the words of the law. ¹⁰Then he said to them, ‘Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared, for this day is holy to our Lord; and do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.’

Luke 4:14-21

¹⁴ Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. ¹⁵He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.

¹⁶ When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, ¹⁷and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

¹⁸ ‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,

¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.’

²⁰And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. ²¹Then he began to say to them, ‘Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.’

I struggle with holy days. I struggle with Sabbath. In some cruel irony, I struggled for a quiet/Sabbath-like mind as I sat down to work on this. Each time I sat down to work on this. Every single time I sat down to work on this. When there weren't naturally occurring distractions from focusing on God and God's Word, I was inventing them. I have a pretty organized house but, boy, you should see it now! I refilled the container for the Q-tips. I repositioned the rubber coasters under the feet of the couch. I sorted through the dining room for items we no longer use which I could then donate. And our movie collection. And my closet. And the linen closet. And two embarrassingly large racks of art supplies. I finally painted those two baskets so they would match the room they are in. I finally mounted that surge suppressor to the wall under Scott's desk. And I vacuumed. Twice. And gave the dog a bath. When I could stall no more [translated: I would be writing this at 11:00 PM on Saturday if I didn't get started while there was still daylight], I looked pensively out of the windows of our living room. And then out of the windows in the space I use for an office.

It wasn't that I felt there was nothing to say on the readings, both of which are grounded in community worship of God. Instead, what do I share with you about what it means to honor holy days of the Lord when I am frankly "terrible, horrible, no good, very bad"¹ at it myself, as is clearly evidenced by the ways I so easily kept myself otherwise occupied? Around this time last year, I referenced a book called "Sabbath in the Suburbs" by MaryAnn McKibben Dana.² I had read it and loved it and was even working with Scott on finding ways to block out Sabbath in our lives. And then I forgot all about it. Poof. Good intentions but little effect. Really, probably negative effect since I suspect anyone improves with regular Sabbath time. (Why else would God command it, yes?) So I pulled the book back off my shelf for renewed inspiration.

Kind of like the people of Israel in the reading from Nehemiah. **They** asked Ezra to bring them the book of the law of Moses, what we know as the first five books of the Bible. And then, when it was read, they wept. General scholarly thought is that the tears were those of a regretful people, a people who had been brought out of exile in Babylon. As we know

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alexander_and_the_Terrible,_Horrible,_No_Good,_Very_Bad_Day

² *King of Kings*, Nicole Farley, January 4, 2015.

from so many other readings, they understood exiles and famines and poor outcomes to be the result of sinning against, turning away from God. Fresh off of an exile, one of their most painful experiences, they were surely looking back with hindsight and thinking “if only we had turned toward God.” The reading of the law would have been a reminder of the ways in which they had turned away. To make a very tiny comparison, I wondered, if I had acted on what I had read, about being intentional about turning toward God, would it have been easier to sit down at my laptop?

Nehemiah and Ezra and the Levites said to the people, loosely, you are here now, not there. Do not choose weeping for the past over choosing well in the present. What they said specifically was, “This day is holy to the Lord your God; do not mourn or weep.” They also said to the people “Go your way, eat the fat and drink the sweet wine and send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared, for this day is holy to our Lord; and do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.” Eating the fat and drinking the sweet wine were luxuries. In order to eat the fat, the animal providing it needed time to get fat before it was killed. Wine is at its sweetest the longer the grape is on the vine. In desperate situations like an exile would bring about, food was eaten as soon as it could be and drink was taken as soon as it was palatable, if that. Sustenance outweighed pleasure.

Today is not yesterday so use **today** to honor God. The Dalai Lama similarly said “There are only two days in the year that nothing can be done. One is called Yesterday and the other is called Tomorrow.”³ The reading from Nehemiah tells us that today eating and drinking goes hand in hand with sharing the food and the drink with “those for whom nothing is prepared.” On this holy day of the Lord they are told that just as much as feeding themselves they should be feeding others. It should not be surprising that Jewish homes have a box called a *pushke*, where coins for the poor are collected. This offering falls under charitable ways called the *tzedakah* (tse-DA-KAH)⁴ and “coins are routinely placed in the box.”⁵ Just as the people were instructed to feed themselves and others in equal parts, the idea around *tzedakah*, giving to the poor, “is not viewed as a generous, magnanimous act; it is

³ <http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/735245-there-are-only-two-days-in-the-year-that-nothing>

⁴ Thanks to MaryAnn McKibben Dana, via *Sabbath in the Suburbs*, for reminding me of this at just the right time.

⁵ <http://www.jewfaq.org/tzedakah.htm>

simply an act of justice and righteousness, the performance of a duty, giving the poor their due.”⁶

Giving the poor their due. Like bringing good news to the poor. Like proclaiming release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, and letting the oppressed go free. In the course of worship in our reading from Luke, Jesus reads from Isaiah in the synagogue on the Sabbath. Dean and Professor Linda McKinnish Bridges explains, “Any male could volunteer or be asked to pray or read portions from the Torah or the Prophets. Likewise, any male could also be asked to give the sermon.”⁷ “The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” That was the sermon, the interpretation of the scripture of Isaiah, the teaching from Isaiah for that day – today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.

Joseph’s kid from up the road reads the scripture – okay, no big deal there – but then says that he has the Spirit of the Lord like the prophet Isaiah? The prophet. Isaiah. Isaiah who said, “my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!”⁸ We look back and can say, “yes, of course, him” for we know that not only had he seen the Lord of hosts but he did bring good news and returned sight to the blind and let the oppressed be free. We are not shocked. To us, who are removed, those are things Jesus did. That’s what Jesus is capable of.

Ah, but those things are intimately connected to the Sabbath, and not just because Luke connected them in the reading for today. This is the day of the Lord; go and do for yourself and equally for others. This is the day of the Lord; receive good news and bring it to others. This is the day of the Lord; you have been freed from the chains of this world by God and you are to do the same for those who remain captive and oppressed. This is the day of the Lord; you have been given your due and you go and give others theirs – respect, integrity, hope, forgiveness, love, a second chance.

One of the most grace-filled parts of McKibben Dana’s book was the okay given to hold Sabbath wherever it could be held. That could mean that you get a half-hour in each week. Or it could mean you actually get a half-hour in each day. **All** our days are the Lord’s

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 1*, p. 287.

⁸ Isaiah 6:5.

and, as best as we can, all of our days are days to receive grace and equally share it. On Monday afternoon, and Thursday morning, and Friday night, go your way, eat the fat and drink the sweet wine and send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared, for this day is holy to our Lord.

Let us pray: On every day which is yours, O Lord, help us to do what we can each today, we pray. Amen.