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Texts: Leviticus 25: 1-5, 8-10; Matthew 11: 28-30
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Come Away With Me: On Sabbaths and Jubilees

I begin with a passing reference to a popular song from Norah Jones. “Come away with me in the night,” she sings. “Come away, and I will write you a song. And I want to walk with you on a cloudy day, in fields where the yellow grass grows knee high...so won’t you come away with me?”

It’s a song that was released in 2002, shortly after the world was changed by the events of 9/11. And it speaks to what I believe is a deep human need to rest from reality, to retreat for just a time, and to allow our cares to recede. It speaks to what Scripture refers to as the need for a sabbath, a time and a space set apart for renewal. That feels like an old-fashioned concept, for very few people manage to keep anything resembling a sabbath these days. Sports leagues schedule games on Sunday mornings, commerce does not rest, and the news cycle never takes a break. And yet there is an alluring insistence throughout the Bible upon the placing limits around our activities, and retreating for a time. Summer, after all, is nearly upon us, a time that many of us use for rest, and for restoration. And so come away with me for just a bit, while we consider this deep human need to step away from reality, in order to reclaim essential aspects of our humanity.

I was reminded of this topic recently in our weekly Bible Study group. We’ve been laboring through the Book of Leviticus lately, and just this past week we came to the end of the book, which was cause for celebration for many, if not most, of those who attend those sessions. Leviticus is probably the least read book of the Bible. Indeed, its reputation for being a tedious catalogue of rules is not entirely unearned. But a careful reading of the book discloses all sorts of surprises.

One such surprise comes late in the book, in chapter 25. It expands on the familiar notion of sabbath keeping, extending its reach from a recurring period of rest every week, to a similar period of time across years, and then across decades. If humans are to rest every seven days, the writers of Leviticus recommend allowing the earth itself to rest every seven years - and with it, presumably, the humans who work the earth. Then - and this is the most radical aspect of Leviticus 25 - every 50 years, the writers suggest a reset for entire human populations, so that those who had fallen into debt, or had been sold into bondage because of those debts, might be released from those obligations. The 50th year is called the year of jubilee, a periodic reset designed to give human beings, especially those trapped in cycles of debt, a fresh start. How stringently these laws were followed is difficult to say, but given the zeal with which the

rest of the books of the law were obeyed, it's reasonable to conclude that at least some people put these laws into practice. At the very least, the expanding scope of sabbath keeping found in Leviticus 25 suggests the wisdom of imposed limits around work and productivity.

It's tempting for modern readers to look upon the prescriptions of Leviticus as primitive, but there are times when we ourselves seem primitive, barbaric even, compared to the Bible. For us, the resources of the earth, the physical labor and now the mental attention of human lives - these are things to be ruthlessly extracted, with fewer and fewer constraints. It would be anachronistic to say that Leviticus 25 is anti-capitalist - the Bible isn't thinking in those terms because capitalism wouldn't be invented for another 2000 years or so - but the book does impose constraints upon economic production that later theologians, to say nothing of economic and social theorists, have noted.

Rather than getting lost in the labyrinth of social and political theory, I simply wish to note in this biblical text the impulse to impose barriers of time and space within human life, but also other forms of life, where work, production, and striving do not intrude. These are cathedrals of time, as the Jewish theologian Abraham Heschel called the sabbath, but they are also spaces of retreat and renewal, where it is possible to access integral aspects of what it is to be alive that otherwise seem to go missing. The biblical text affords such luxuries, and we do well to meditate upon such practices.

I'll expand on this topic from what will feel like an unlikely and probably unfamiliar source. Lately, I have been reading Boccaccio's *Decameron*, a book written in Italy during the 14th century, a generation after Dante. It is a wonderfully irreverent book, brimming with carnal delights, but there is also a very serious ethic running through it.¹ In a strange way, it is not wholly unlike what we find in Leviticus, where a partition of time and space - a coming away - works to reset the human community.

Here is the premise. During the Black Plague that ravaged Florence in 1348, a group of ten young people - seven women and three men - flee to the countryside outside of the city. They do so in order to escape the disaster around them, but also in order to preserve the social fabric that was being shredded by the plague. There in the countryside, they take walks. They prepare and eat meals together. They recite poetry and they make music. They sleep. But above all, they gather in a garden setting every day in order to tell stories. Each of the ten tells one story every day, for ten days, and the stories delight, instruct, and entertain. And then the idyll is over.

¹ In much of what follows, I am drawing upon a monologue from Robert Harrison, on his program "Entitled Opinions." See "Pandemic, Dread, and Boccaccio's *Decameron*" from April 7, 2020. Here is the link: <https://entitled-opinions.com/2020/04/07/pandemic-dread-and-boccaccios-decameron/>

It would be easy enough to accuse this fair brigade (that is what Boccaccio calls them) of negligence and irresponsibility, and indeed, in a different sermon and in a different frame of mind, I might lift up virtues opposite to the ones they practice. But the book proposes an ethic that we do well to consider, and sometimes, to emulate. Just as in Leviticus, there are times in each of our lives when the best course of action is to stop, to retreat, to rest, in order to guard and to cultivate the very best in ourselves. And there is wisdom in being able to discern when to engage, when to throw oneself into a struggle, and when, for the sake of our souls, to nurture something different - the places where art or poetic visions emerge? Necessity, whether of an economic or a moral variety, would argue for ceaseless production and activity. But a much different spirit animates the Bible, which, like Boccaccio, counsels the pause, the break, the hiatus, the retreat. The sabbath.

I have often, over the past month or so, referred to the philosopher Hannah Arendt, and her notion of *Amor Mundi*, the love of the world. It's a theme I keep circling around, and it seems to me that this sabbath break found in Leviticus and the coming away found in Boccaccio are somehow a part of *Amor Mundi*. In an essay entitled "Humanity in Dark Times," written in 1959, Arendt offers some qualifications on what a commitment to the world might entail.² In the essay, she distinguishes between an escape from reality - a fleeing from the world - and a periodic retreat from reality, in order to engage the world more fully. She finds the former tendency irresponsible. The latter she finds necessary.

In certain times and places, she argues, there is a very real human need to create distance from reality in order to cultivate the virtues that human beings depend upon - civility, sociability, decorum, conversation, imagination, and above all, rest. Maintaining that kind of distance is, in the words of one theorist, a kind of immune response to the breakdown of social order that takes place during something like a plague, or a war, or a forced emigration. In such circumstances, it is actually a very healthy response to create a barrier between oneself and the world - a sabbath if you will - precisely in order to continue existing in a sane and humane fashion.³

I think of Palestine in this regard. In particular, I think of Daoud Nasser's family olive farm, the Tent of Nations, a space of cultivated beauty that is surrounded by hostile and increasingly violent Israeli settlers. So too I think of Mazin Qumsiyeh's Natural History Museum in Bethlehem, a space in which the intensity of Israeli military assaults become somehow distant. Both are spaces in which a different form of temporality emerges. Both are spaces that seem somehow set apart, and for that reason they feel powerfully humane. They are places in

² Arendt, Hannah, "Humanity in Dark Times," from the book *Men in Dark Times* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1968), pgs. 3-31).

³ An insight gleaned from Harrison, "Entitled Opinions," April 7, 2020. See above

which civility can be practiced, where imagination can be cultivated, and where human decency can be found.

Our situation is different, of course, but we too seem to be living through the kind of breakdown that Boccaccio describes in the *Decameron*. For us too, norms of civility, decorum, and generosity, to say nothing of things like compassion, decency, and human well being, are being left behind or forgotten. For us too, a kind of exhaustion and spiritual torpor have set in. Many of us can scarcely bear to listen to the news anymore. Others of us can think of little else, so insistent are the voices telling us what to feel, think, do and believe. Where are we to find relief? Where are we to turn in order to hear from ourselves, in order to experience our worth, in order to discover the deep wells of soul that exist inside us all, in order to listen for the still small voice of God?

Many turn to the arts. Many turn to nature. But I would also like to believe that FCCOL is such a place. It's true that the Gospel asks us to confront reality rather than to flee from it. That means having to engage and confront some of the more difficult truths of our world right now. But there are also times in which a church must serve as a kind of buffer, as a kind of retreat, not unlike the spaces carved out by the characters in Boccaccio. In that regard, a church, at its best, can be thought of as a community in which our social immune system kicks in to ward off the pestilence of self-centeredness, greed, insult, isolation and degradation that is afflicting us. Here, co-immunities such as cooperation, solidarity, conviviality and collegiality are practiced.

But above all else, storytelling is a central feature of what we do here. Like Boccaccio's fair brigade, we narrate over and over the stories we find in Scripture - stories about Jesus, about Moses, about the people depicted in Leviticus - even as we narrate our own stories for one another, discerning how our stories intersect with the Divine story. Storytelling is one of the oldest arts known to civilization, and it is one of the supreme social virtues to be able to tell a story well. That's why our recent practice of hosting Moth Story Nights is so very important, but it's also why the one on one conversations that we've cultivated in recent years are so valuable as well. Our stories delight and sometimes they enlighten. But as often as not, our stories are gifts we can offer to one another in order to help get through the day with a modicum of pleasure.⁴ A well told story can be a way of cultivating our humanity, while also providing some much needed distance from some of the more troubling aspects of our world. Surely that's one of the reasons Jesus taught using parables and stories. And surely that's one of the reasons we return to those stories over and over again.

It seems right, then, to close with a story. Here is one of my own. On a Saturday night in November, some 16 years ago, I was working an overnight shift as a chaplain down at

⁴ 4 Harrison, April 7, 2020.

Bridgeport Hospital. It had been a quiet night, and after finishing all my rounds, I went to the overnight room and fell asleep. I was awoken around 2 in the morning by a call - someone was being brought into the emergency room after a terrible accident. I was getting used to the realities of working in a hospital by then, but what I saw that night was more reality than I wished to see. I'll spare you a description, but it involved some of the more disturbing sights and also smells that I have ever witnessed. I never got back to bed - there were people who needed attention, and so I was up for most of the night. When the shift ended in the morning, I was exhausted, and shaken, and I just wanted to go home in order to sleep.

It was a Sunday morning though, and I was profoundly unsettled. And so I went to church with Rachael and the kids. And there was something about being surrounded by that loving community, and singing hymns, and saying prayers, that I needed that day. Not unlike the Florentine countryside that I have lately discovered in Boccaccio, it was a kind of coming away that I experienced that morning. The sanctuary and the liturgy provided a gap that established some necessary distance from all I had witnessed the night before. That morning, we exchanged the peace of Christ, speaking those words to our neighbors. When someone offered the words to me, I dissolved in tears. They were precisely the words that I needed, filling me with an assurance of God's sustaining care that I did not then possess. It was the most meaningful sabbath rest of my life.

A sabbath rest can arrive in all sorts of ways. As we enter this summer season, my hope is that each of us can discover some form of sabbath practice that will provide us with the necessary distance for our own immunity systems to kick in. Spaces and times for reading. For conversation. For stories. For travel. For friendship. For care. But I also hope that this will be such a place for you in the coming months as well. A cathedral of time. A space of repose. A place in which you can achieve the necessary distance that I think we all need right now from all that is happening around us and to us. A place to be renewed and refreshed, so as to meet those challenges well when the time is right.

"Come away with me, and I will sing you a song." Amen.