

## GOOD NEWS: REST FOR THE WEARY

Deuteronomy 5:12-15

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3 January 2016

This sermon series for the first six weeks of this new year is entitled, “Good News for the Winter Blues.” We haven’t had as much winter as normal, so perhaps you haven’t experienced the blues yet, but this time of year can be challenging for many people.

Did you know that in an average January, Cleveland averages only three sunny days and five partly sunny days? 8 days with sun out of 31. Now you have the blues, don’t you?

We brighten up December with Christmas lights and decorations, but most of us take most of them down, even though we have three months of winter to go. We know that the days are getting longer, but it’s awfully hard to tell. The lack of sunlight affects our mood.

And there are other things, too. In January, we receive the bills from all of that Christmas spending. There’s football, but then again, this is Cleveland.

So winter is a time to turn inward, to focus on our inner lives, to look for and nurture the kind of growth that happens under the surface, silently, slowly. We take our cue from nature. For underneath the wet and frozen ground plants are doing the work that prepares them for spring and for the emergence of beauty and color. Even though we can’t see it, we know it’s happening. The roots of plants are alive, earthworms are active; there is all kinds of life underground that is necessary but invisible.

One science teacher had his class perform an experiment. They went outside on a cold day and stuck a thermometer into the ground. Above ground it was two degrees,

but below ground it was 27 degrees. The children were amazed. If the teacher had been able to find a six-foot thermometer, the children would have found the earth to be around 50 degrees, plenty warm for organisms to thrive, for the roots of tulip bulbs and lily bulbs to grow and receive nourishment from the soil.

It's good news, this underground and unseen growth. Good news, because it can happen to all of us. There is no season in which God is not at work in our lives.

I don't know how many of you made New Year's resolutions on Friday. I do know that google reported an uptick in searches for the word "diet" on January 1. For many people the new year is one of those landmarks, a time for reflection and for looking ahead, for thinking about changes we want to make in the way we live.

Why is it so hard to keep those resolutions? There are a lot of theories. Some experts say we choose goals that are too lofty, or we try to change too many things at once. We forget that the best way to change is through baby steps, through making small incremental changes, encouraging ourselves along the way, and seeking accountability partners to help us stay on track.

Here's my theory. When we make resolutions, our mindset is negative. We want to have a positive outcome, to be sure. We want to lose weight, be healthier, save more money, be more productive. But what we say to ourselves is all negative. We are giving ourselves the message, "I'm fat," "I spend too much money," "I'm lazy." What if, instead, we said to ourselves, "I am a child created by God, in God's own image. God wants me to live an abundant life, God wants me to thrive. God will strengthen me to make the changes I need and want."

What if we saw a new way of life not as a punishment, or a drudgery, something that will rob us of pleasure, but as a means to joy? Instead of seeing that resolution as

something that to dread, what if you saw it as a door, a gate, to a way of life that will bring you great satisfaction? Perhaps we've misunderstood the idea of goals and resolutions.

Our scripture today is one of the Ten Commandments, and they, too, have been misunderstood. Many of them are written in the negative. "Don't do this. Thou shalt NOT." But the intent of them is positive - the intent is for us to live in a society where there is harmony. Why are we told not to steal one another's possessions? Because no one wants to live in a world where theft is rampant. Each of the commandments is intended to help us build a world of peace and security.

It's a different way of looking at life -- beginning to see that what God wants for us and what brings us deep joy are really not at odds at all, but are, indeed, the very same thing.

The fourth commandment is written in the positive. Keep the sabbath day, honor it, observe it, don't work, keep it holy. This commandment is not a punishment, but instead one of God's most gracious gifts. The gift of the sabbath is a gift that is sorely needed in our time and place.

We live in a fast-paced world of distractions and busy-ness. We are a people who are tired but who cannot sleep. We are a people who are afraid of downtime, because it makes us feel unimportant. We are a people afraid to take vacation because we think we'll lose our jobs. If we do take vacation, we check email and voice mail incessantly. We have high school students who are scheduled from 5 AM until midnight with sports practices, home work for their advanced classes and extracurricular activities.

We are a people who need Sabbath. In Hebrew, the word means “stop”. The first Sabbath was practiced by God in one of the creation stories. God takes seven days to create the world. Six days of work, of creation and then one day to stop. On that seventh day, God rested. God took the time to look around at all that had been created. In that space, God could observe, pay attention, and say, “Look at all this. It’s good, it’s very good.”

The command is to stop and rest. It’s not at all, not in any way, meant as a punishment or a burden. It is, in every way, something that enhances and enriches our lives and brings us joy.

Keeping the Sabbath isn’t a suggestion; it’s a commandment. Because it’s necessary for abundant life. Just as our society cannot work if we all steal each other’s possessions, our lives won’t work if we don’t learn to stop and rest.

Keeping the Sabbath means stopping long enough to think about the kind of life God wants for you, realizing how much God loves you - not for what you do, not for what you produce, not for how much money you make or for how busy you are -- but simply for being you.

Keeping the Sabbath means remembering to take care of yourself because you bear God’s image. It’s about the re-creative properties of recreation, remembering the joy of being alive and sharing that joy with others.

When we slow down, we cut through the noise and practice trusting in God to provide what no one else can. When we rest from work, when we rest from trying to get ahead, we stop seeing our neighbor as a competitor, and we remember our neighbor’s humanity.

What do we miss if we never stop? Do we miss seeing the world around as a gift? If we're constantly on the go, do we have space in our lives for gratitude? Even God took one day out of seven to express gratitude, to pay attention, to notice, to observe so much that is good, so much that is beautiful in creation.

What do we miss if we never stop? Many of the world's best inventions were made not by someone clocking into work from 9-5 but from someone who was daydreaming, wandering, wondering, someone whose imagination was engaged.

I recently came across this quote: **“Busy is a decision. You don't find the time to do things; you make the time to do things.”** Now I know that there are limits to that. I know some of you work two jobs to make ends meet. I know some of you are taking care of children and your schedule depends on theirs. We don't have unlimited choices. But we do have choices.

What would it mean for you to create time and space in this new year for some sabbath rest? It doesn't have to be a day a week. It could be an hour here and there that you just block off on the calendar. It could be taking a walk, no earbuds, just paying attention to the world around you and to your own inner voice. It could be finding a day to take yourself on a mini-retreat, even in your own home. TV off, phone off, computer off - thinking, praying, listening to what God is saying to you.

We are weary, aren't we? Of the constant busy-ness, noise, and distractions? Without winter, the bulbs would never bloom in the spring. There would be no new growth, no color, no green shoots, no bright blossoms. What about the soil of your life? What's growing, what wants to be born within you? Give it a rest and let God do the planting.