

Time and Space

Curtis Murphy

First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto

28 July 2019

N.B. These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship, supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

Once upon a time there was a rabbi who was being held captive in a cave. His persecutors had imprisoned him so deep in the cave that no sunshine or ray of light could reach him, and he could not tell whether it was day or night. Nothing tormented him as much as the thought that he could not celebrate the Sabbath as he had done since he was a young child, since he did not know what day it was, or when it was sunrise or sunset. He was also tormented by an overwhelming desire to smoke, and this caused him tremendous pain and suffering and guilt. And then, all at once, he felt the craving suddenly vanish. And the voice within him said: "It is Friday evening, the time when my longing for that which is forbidden on the Sabbath always left me." He shouted in joy and praised God and blessed the Sabbath day. And every week, as long as he was held captive, his tormenting desire to smoke vanished at the beginning of each Sabbath, and returned once the Sabbath was over.

And on the 7th day, He rested. Most of us have heard that phrase a handful of times. But Heschel says it's not the most accurate interpretation or translation of that Biblical story. Rather, he says, following a long tradition of rabbinic interpretation, "On the 7th day, God *created rest*." So the 7th day, the Sabbath day, was not the day that creation stopped, or the day God took a break, but rather the day that "tranquility, peace, serenity, and repose" were created and brought into the world.

The 7th day is the culmination of creation, not the end of it, and the observation of the Sabbath is the blessing and giving thanks for this act of creation. Heschel says that, while some Christian traditions built great cathedrals and sacred spaces to worship and experience the divine, in the Jewish tradition, the Sabbaths are the great cathedrals. I think of his daughter Susannah's words from the introduction to the 2nd edition of his book published after his death. "My mother and I kindled the lights for the Sabbath, and all of a sudden I felt transformed, emotionally and even physically." It sounds like the feeling of stepping across the threshold into sacred space, except it's stepping into sacred time. It's a palpable shift in the way we experience the world. Heschel said that Jewish ritual life was an "architecture of time," rather than of space. Johanna writes, "The

Sabbath does not simply come into being on Saturdays; the depth of its experience is created...by how we behave on the other six days of the week; they are a pilgrimage to the Sabbath.” Just like a pilgrim walks a path to arrive at a sacred place, every week is a pilgrimage to the Sabbath – a sacred place in time – and that every day is a step along that journey.

One of the main rules of the Sabbath is “to kindle no fires on the sabbath,” which is one reason why observant Jewish households traditionally made sure there was a fire already lit, which could simply be maintained throughout the Sabbath day. Heschel builds on an long tradition of interpretation and says that the instruction to “kindle no fire” on the Sabbath means to kindle no fire, including the fire of righteous indignation. Thus, his daughter Susannah says, “In our home, certain topics were avoided on the Sabbath – politics, the Holocaust, the war in Vietnam – while others were emphasized.

This is not escapism, retreating into a bubble to avoid the harsh realities of life. Heschel was from Poland and studied in Germany, before escaping to the United States in 1940, and he and his friends and colleagues had all had many close loved ones killed. They knew all about the worst aspects of humanity and life in this world, and still chose to dedicate a full day to *menuha*, defined as “a restfulness that is also a celebration.”

Heschel is also adamant that the Sabbath is not about austerity. It is a sin to fast on the Sabbath. The Sabbath is for feasting, joy and celebration. But not for mindless entertainment and diversion – it is a time, in his words, “to mend our tattered lives.” And we mend them not with joyless discipline, but with conscious participation in the beauty of life.

Beyond this, Heschel says that Sabbath is best understood by what it is not. This is perhaps best illustrated by another story. Since I preached last week about fences, I found this story particularly relevant: “A pious man once took a stroll in his vineyard on the Sabbath. He saw a breach in the fence, and then determined to mend it when the Sabbath would be over (knowing that work was forbidden on the Sabbath). At the expiration of the Sabbath he decided: since the thought of repairing the fence occurred to me on the Sabbath, I shall never repair it.”

Susannah Heschel, Abraham Heschel’s daughter and an accomplished scholar in her own right, observed that when her father’s book was first published in 1950, there was a trend for clergy and religious leaders to write books emphasizing the psychological health benefits of religion, a trend which is having a resurgence in our own day, with mindfulness meditation in particular being promoted as practice largely for personal psychological benefit. Heschel drew from a deeper

well. “The Sabbath comes like a caress, wiping away fear, sorrow and somber memories.” For Heschel, there was no doubt that the Sabbath was a gift. He said it was a day to bid farewell to work, and celebrate the fact that the world had already been created. It was not up to us.

Heschel quotes the biblical book of Exodus, which says, “six days shalt thou labor and do all thy work.” And he asks: Is it possible for a human being to do all of their work in six days? Does not our work always remain incomplete? What the verse means to convey is: Rest on the Sabbath as *if all your work were done: Rest even from the thought of labor*. The Sabbath is emphatically not simply rest for the sake of being more efficient or effective in work the rest of the time. The practice of Sabbath is the opposite of “time management.” Which is a point that’s easily missed. I think I have missed it myself.

Before reading Heschel, I would have given myself an “A” for effort, for at least trying with imperfect results to implement a personal practice of Sabbath-keeping over the last few years. But now I think that there is no A for effort – the effort itself is part of the problem. And I’m not sure if a Sabbath that is observed as a personal discipline – outside of a community of practice and tradition – is really a Sabbath at all. I’m not sure if it can be anything other than a day off – certainly a valuable thing if one can manage it, but not necessarily sacred time, and too easily co-opted by the habits of efficiency and self-improvement.

“The Sabbath comes as a caress...” Heschel says that sacred time is a gift, a cathedral in time that we can enter and be blessed. It’s not something we can create, only receive.

Susannah Heschel writes: “...on the Sabbath, my father’s reading habits changed. He did not read secular books, works of philosophy or politics, but instead turned to Hebrew religious texts. Because writing is forbidden on the Sabbath, he would sometimes place a napkin or a paper clip to mark a page, so that years later I could tell which books had been his Shabbat reading.” Once upon a time, I would have seen a distinction like that as absurd, or at least old-fashioned. As if there is anything better about marking a page with a napkin than writing on it with a pen. But now I think that such practices are meaningless only if you don’t know what they mean, and find Johanna’s image of her father’s books marked with a napkin to be beautiful. Heschel reminds us that the Sabbath is not for improving any part of creation, *including ourselves*. The Sabbath comes like a caress. Amen and blessed be.