

Sabbath
Rest, Rise, Serve
Reading from the Old Testament: Isaiah 58:3-14
Reading from the New Testament: Hebrews 12:28-29

It was the last scene of one of the more inane movies of all time: *Airplane*. I'm not giving anything away here because the movie came out in 1980, so if you haven't seen it yet ... well you still have those two hours of your life ... though I'll have to admit, I was at the perfect age to be doubled over in laughter by the slapstick parade of stupid jokes. Consequently, a disturbing percentage of the dialogue remains etched in my brain: "flying a plane is no different than riding a bicycle, just a lot harder to put baseball cards in the spokes;" "Surely, you can't be serious ... I am serious, and don't call me Shirley." It was dialogue that would make Bart Simpson sound like King Lear.

So, at the end of the movie, once the plane lands, a bevy of reporters sprint toward the phone booths to call their stories in, all hoping to be first with the scoop. Only, they all reach the phones booths simultaneously, thus sending the whole bank of booths tumbling ... and yes, I confess, I laughed out loud. Not proud of it, but there it is. Of course, if you're younger than 25 and you go home and watch the movie tonight, the scene makes no sense at

all. What's a phone booth? And, why would a reporter use one? However, in the era of *Airplane*, my college roommate was an aspiring sportswriter, and I remember watching, with fascination, his process for submitting an article after a basketball game. To beat the deadline for the paper, they had to have a good percentage of their articles written (i.e. typed) on a portable typewriter before the game ended. Then it was a mad rush to write the conclusion and elbow their way to that newfangled thing called a fax machine, knowing the impatience of the editor on the receiving end of the fax.

Before that, going back to the dawn of the 20th Century, reporters would scramble and elbow their way to a telephone to get their news scoops to the printers first, much like that iconic gif from *Airplane*. Prior to the telephone, the reporter out in the field relied on the telegraph, but before that the reporter was dependent on an envelope and a postage stamp. Thus, when Gen. Cornwallis raised the flag of surrender on October 17, 1781, the news didn't hit the front page of the Philadelphia newspaper until October 24th. The contrast with today's instantaneous news reports to which we have access from across the globe is staggering, and such contrasts gave rise to the frequently employed idioms used to convey a lack of commitment or

effort: *Much to the audience's disappointment, the performer was just mailing it in; or, It's obvious from your evaluation that you've just been phoning it in of late.* Old fashioned snail mail in some ways is associated with not putting in the effort to work efficiently; just going through the motions, not learning what is needed to keep up, or doing the bare minimum to get by. For example, no one wants their surgeon to *mail it in*.

So, here's a question for you: Could you confess, at least to yourself, those occasions when you were *just mailing it in*? Rather than clocking in and clocking out, you were clocked in while clocked out. Can you own up to it? That college class in which you were enrolled, but serially absent? For me, it was COBOL in the pre-desktop, punch card era of computers, when the day's homework was due, and I hadn't done it. My more responsible classmate might have just lent me his stack of completed punch cards to put under my name to run through the card reader. I survived the class but was, let's just say, ill-prepared for the final, like I hadn't caught on to the fact that if I didn't learn the material for the homework, I might just have a problem with the test. My friend went to work for the Federal Reserve. I repented, and went to seminary. Go figure.

Some NFL teams, certainly not the Panthers, after a slow start and multiple ugly losses could be tempted to “mail it in” and tank the rest of the season, knowing that a couple more wins will net them less of a return than a string of losses which could possibly position them for a top draft pick. Mailing it in.

You’ve probably experienced the monotone voice and faraway eyes of the socially intolerant sales clerk. You approach the guy at the book store and ask if he could direct you to Dr. Seuss, and he rolls his eyes while glumly reporting that he doesn’t know where the hospital is. Mailing it in. It could be a job, a chore, a workout, a marriage, your responsibilities as a parent, or maybe ... your faith, the act of worship, the call to love your neighbor. What Isaiah wants to ask is this: Are you mailing it in?

Wait a minute, preacher, what are you asking here? Mailing in my faith? Isn’t faith a noun, something you either have or don’t have? Mailing in worship? Dude, I’m here, aren’t I? What are you talking about? I’m just a consumer here. Isn’t worship the preacher’s job, the choir’s responsibility? What do you want? Hey, I’m awake, and we don’t even have the tympani this week!

Preacher, how can you suggest that I'm mailing it in when it comes to loving my neighbor. I sent him a card when his house burnt down. Of course, he doesn't have a mailbox right now, but... I told him he was in my thoughts and prayers. I mean, I don't pray all that much, and maybe my thoughts are locked in the do-not-disturb corner of my brain, but at least I said something. Mailing it in? Me? Are you kidding?

The prophet Isaiah is speaking to a people who have paid a heavy price for the failures of recent ancestors who had habitually mailed it in when it came to honoring their covenant of faith with God. Ages before, Moses had said to a newly formed people: "See, just as the Lord my God has charged me, I now teach you statutes and ordinances for you to observe in the land that you are about to enter and occupy. You must observe them diligently, for this will show your wisdom and discernment to the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and discerning people!'" "Hear therefore, O Israel, and observe them diligently, so that it may go well with you."

However, over time their commitment to that covenant with God began to wane. Oh, they kept up the rituals, but the connection between

their worship and their way of life became less and less apparent.

Eventually, through the prophet Isaiah, the Lord would observe, “these people draw near with their mouths and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their worship of me is a human commandment learned by rote...” Mailing it in. The very tools of faith and worship and a way of life that would provide for their own well being had been long neglected, and like a diseased heart, battered by negligence and abuse, the nation collapsed, becoming easy prey for the armies of Babylon. The result was exile with their children’s children paying the price of their negligence.

Yet, 50 years later, there was hope. With the defeat of Babylon by the Persians came the permission for the heirs of Abraham to return to Jerusalem where they could renew their covenant and restore their community. However, as Isaiah observed the relationship between their rituals and their way of life, he saw the same contradictions that had hastened the demise of their forebears. Isaiah lamented, “Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers. Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist. Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high.” Once again, when

it came to faith, when it came to worship, when it came to their investment in and attention to their neighbor, the prophet saw the dangerous disconnect between worship and life.

Yes, faith is a noun, but so is that NordicTrack, that Peloton, gathering dust in your garage. You see it, you're not lying if you say you have it, but to what end is its impact? Time after time, the prophets had demonstrated the consequences of failing to connect the noun of faith with a verb like serve; the noun of ritual with a verb like worship, like love .

Yet, Isaiah is not seeking to condemn, but like those 16th Century bearded dudes with their black robes, Calvin, Zwingli, and Knox, Isaiah is seeking to convey the power of reformation and transformation. He implores the people of God, "If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday ... you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in."

Worship involves ritual, but worship is so much more, invoking the investment of our whole being. Remember Kierkegaard's famous exposition on worship, "Worship isn't God's show. God is the audience. God's watching. The congregation, they are the actors in this drama. Worship is their show. And the minister is just reminding the people of their forgotten lines."

I am not an innovator, an influencer, a creator; I'm a reporter pointing to the cross, pointing to Jesus, pointing to the story of God and God's people, just reminding us: This is who we are; See what God has done; Hold onto that, live that, and see what God will do. Walter Brueggemann said, "Sabbath is not simply the pause that refreshes. It is the pause that transforms." (Walter Brueggemann, *Sabbath as Resistance*) Or as the Apostle Paul put it, "present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect."

Worship is thus, not a retreat from the world, but a way of life in the world. Worship is not an escape, but an engagement with life as God intended. A hymn we occasionally sing phrases it like this: "Open wide our

hands in sharing, as we heed Christ's ageless call, healing, teaching, and reclaiming, serving you by loving all.” (Robert Edwards, *God, Whose Giving Knows No Ending*)

You shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in. The question Isaiah puts before us is how these words may come to pass as engaged worship is enacted through the week.

A most profound witness to the transformational power of Isaiah’s call to God’s people and of Christ’s church taking worship into life was the practice of nonviolence during the Civil Rights Movement. Many of the primary organizers, like MLK, Joseph Lowery, James Bevel, and C.T. Vivian, they were pastors just taking their worship into the world.

Nonviolence is often dismissed as tragically naive in the face of armed opposition. Lambs to the slaughter. However, in a recent history of the movement, Thomas Ricks highlights the training, perseverance, courage, and vision that were so integral to progress. He says, “The civil-rights movement was often creative, but it was rarely spontaneous. Its members did not just take to the streets to see what would happen.” (*The Economist*) And there was nothing passive in their acts of nonviolence, just as there was

nothing passive about Jesus' journey to the cross. The Freedom Riders, protesting segregated bus stations in the South, they knew the risks. James Bevel asked the volunteers to write their own eulogy before the trip, saying, "If I can't explain to your folks why you're dead, I'm not going to send you." They told their volunteers to see their adversaries as human beings deserving of empathy. They were told to look their attackers in the eye; to imagine them as babies who have not yet learned to hate. The ultimate goal wasn't victory, but justice and reconciliation. (*The Economist*) Watch the films. See the fortitude, courage, and unrelenting spirit. Such is the power of a worshipping community engaged with life.

What can tomorrow mean when fueled by what God reveals to us here? To what service will your worship lead? Whose life will be lifted through your acts of service, acts fueled by God's grace at work in you? Perhaps Kaitlin Curtice said it best in a recent article in *Sojourners*, "When we are rested and filled up to do our work in the world, we are better equipped to help others. Make your life a safe space where people who are exhausted can enter in." (Kaitlin Curtice, *Sojourners*) For such is the love of the Jesus we worship. Sabbath: We rest, We rise, We serve. Amen.