

Sabbath

Rest and Rise

Reading from the Old Testament: Isaiah 58:3-14

Reading from the Gospels: Matthew 15:3, 7-9

Amidst a rough month dealing with the bane of broken ribs and hospitalization, my mother was able to go with my sister to the Symphony. Powell Symphony Hall in St. Louis is a majestic and storied venue for the city's long tenured top-tier Orchestra.

My mother's love affair with the piano began as a child, providing her with a passion and vocation that have lasted a lifetime. So, at the age of 90, being able to go hear a live performance of her beloved Rachmaninoff Piano Concerto No. 2 was a poignant balm for her soul. Even if you are not familiar with the piece, you probably recognize the melody. [Zach]

Soaring, romantic, exultant, haunting, and powerful, the treasured concerto, composed in 1901, marked a dramatic turn in Rachmaninoff's life. The premiere of his First Symphony had been thoroughly panned by critics, which may have been partly due to the fact that the conductor appointed for the premiere was possibly drunk.

In any case, the premiere's failure sent Rachmaninoff into a deep depression that left him unable to compose. Remembering the period, he said he felt "like the man who had suffered a stroke and for a long time had lost the use of his head and hands." (*Wikipedia*) Adding to his depression was the Russian Church's refusal to marry Rachmaninoff and his fiancé ... because they were first cousins, and in addition, Rachmaninoff hadn't been going to Confession ... So, there's that. His inability to compose was such that he was invited to stay at the home of Leo Tolstoy so that the great author could encourage him. However, the visit did nothing to relieve his depression, and he remained unable to compose until he was referred to a therapist for hypnotherapy and daily counseling sessions focusing on sleep patterns, nutrition, and mood.

Rachmaninoff emerged from the period having reignited his passion and desire to compose. The result is a timeless piece, actually dedicated to the therapist who helped him, and it stands as a definitive testament to beauty, melody, harmony, peace, and hope; and in hearing it, it was an inspiring boost for my mom.

So, that was the first part of the symphony's performance. However, following the intermission, the orchestra offered something entirely different, John Corigliano's Symphony No. 1. I'd ask Zach to play the melody, but I'm not sure there is one. The piece calls for such instruments as finger cymbals, temple blocks, tambourine, anvil, metal plate with hammer, brake drum, triangle, police whistle, whip, and a ratchet. *(Wikipedia)*

The piece at regular intervals sounds like a semi with bad brakes driving slowly through a frenzied metal-ripping machine shop. Imagine using hubcaps to play frisbee with people who can't catch. Clang, clang, clang. Maybe the orchestra was saving money by hiring a couple of ham-handed mechanics from Howie's House of Pistons instead of professional percussionists. Actually, there is beauty in the composition, owing largely to its theme. Written in the late 80's at the height of the AIDs epidemic, it represents a tribute to the fallen while also acknowledging the horrific destruction of life caused by the disease.

But here's the thing, while my mother and sister were deeply moved by the Rachmaninoff concerto, when I asked them about the second piece, my preternaturally cheery sister described how it creatively evoked the

tragedy and trauma of AIDs. My mom just said it was ugly. At 90, there's no reason not to speak your truth. Having perfect pitch, my mom is not big on dissonance.

Dissonance. In music, it is an intentional lack of harmony among musical notes. In other spaces, it is a tension or clash resulting from a combination of unsuitable elements. You remember the quizzes in grade school: *One of these things is not like the other* - On one side would be a picture of a broccoli stalk, and beside it would be a list of four items from which to select the one not associated with broccoli, perhaps a carrot, a bell pepper, an ear of corn ... and a Buick. When Forrest Gump said he and Jenny were like peas and carrots, he meant something very different than if he had said they were like fudge and mustard. In election season, we know all about dissonance as candidates promise the exact opposite of what they'll accomplish, and boast of priorities and values that bear no resemblance to their behaviors. Dissonance.

Though the word isn't included in our text this morning, it explains the message Isaiah is seeking to communicate. The people of Judah had been surviving in Babylon for 50 years following Nebuchadnezzar's

destruction of Jerusalem and the exile of its leading citizens. They had been given a certain amount of freedom to maintain their religion in a foreign land, so, without a Temple, the focus of their faith practices turned to the keeping of the Sabbath and the practice of such things as fasting and repentance. In 539 BCE, Cyrus of Persia defeated the Babylonians and the next year he gave the exiles permission to return to Jerusalem, rebuild their temple, and resume life in their homeland. A long period of estrangement and suffering was coming to an end and the prospect of home and temple renewed hope ... except Isaiah noticed something disturbing as he observed the people. He spied an alarming dissonance between their practice of religion and the way they were living from day to day. The love and justice of God were not evident in the way they were treating each other.

They were nasty to one another, arguing and complaining about everything, blaming others for their woes, and pouncing on anyone who stood in the way of getting what they wanted. My theology professor was often heard saying that the fundamental human predicament is that we are self-centered when we were created to be God-centered. And being God centered is most clearly revealed in how we treat each other, always seeking our neighbor's good as a reflection of the love God has for all.

What Isaiah observed was a people who had perfected the show of Sabbath. They put on a mighty nice worship service, buying the expensive candle holders and ordering massive floral arrangements. When the faithful entered, the aisles seemed like the runways of Paris fashion week. And when it came to fasting? My, what a performance ... Oscar worthy - drawn faces, deep-set, glazed over eyes, knees weak from lack of nutrition, growling stomachs, and maybe even a few moans. Oh, it was a show! They acted the part so well, even complaining that the Lord was not paying enough attention to the thespian perfection of their piety; and Isaiah skewered them for it. "Yet day after day they seek me and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness and did not forsake the ordinance of their God." Look at me! Did you see how good I am?

Problem was, Isaiah observed how their practice of religion was superficial, purely performative. The prophet says, "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." There was a dissonance between their perfectly executed rituals and the character of

their lives. They were falling into the same trap as their great-great grandparents back in the halcyon days of Jerusalem and the Temple. Worship was elaborate and showy, but life from day to day was marked by exploiting the vulnerable, glorifying greed, chasing other gods. Self-interest was the priority; the common good was ignored. Superficially pious. Inwardly mercenary, insensitive. The dissonance between ritual and faithfulness was deafening. “Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high.” Isaiah was just pointing what was transparent to God, calling out their hollow faith, as if saying, *You think God doesn’t notice the contradiction between Sabbath ritual and Monday’s duplicity?*

200 years earlier, the prophet Amos had decried the same phenomenon in the old northern kingdom of Israel. “You trample on the poor ... and push aside the needy at the gate ... I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies ... Take away from me the noise of your songs ... But let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like and overflowing stream.”

Amos saw a preponderance of this hypocrisy and predicted it would lead to Israel’s collapse ... and it did. Isaiah saw a preponderance of this

hypocrisy and predicted it would lead to Jerusalem's destruction ... and it did. A couple of generations later as an exiled people finally had the hope of going home and resuming their corporate life as a people, a writer, in Isaiah's name, saw growing evidence of the same hypocrisy and sought to warn the people, "Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high."

Yet, along with the warning, the Lord put before the people this alternative, "Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly ... then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like noonday."

Sabbath allows for the transformation of dissonance into congruity, distortion into understanding, stridency into peace. Walter Brueggemann says, "In our own contemporary context of the rat race of anxiety, the celebration of Sabbath is an act of both resistance and alternative ...

Sabbath is about withdrawal from the anxiety system of [the powers and principalities of this world], the refusal to let one's life be defined by production and consumption and the endless pursuit of private well-being.”

(Walter Brueggemann, *Sabbath as Resistance*)

Sabbath rest is a space to re-center our minds and our wills in the God of Creation and Grace, who alone can lead us into a chaotic and fractured world as instruments of God’s peace. Abraham Lincoln said, "As we keep or break the Sabbath Day we nobly save or meanly lose the last best hope by which man rises." And as Isaiah points out, Sabbath is about more than the rituals; Sabbath is about transformation. He says, “if you call the sabbath a delight and the holy day of the Lord honorable; if you honor it, not going your own ways, serving your own interests, or pursuing your own affairs; then you shall take delight in the Lord, and I will make you ride upon the heights of the earth.”

Look ... a loved one hears the moaning, sees the distress, can’t ignore the limp, and so, with love they encourage, prompt, push, cajole, and bribe you until you make the doctor’s appointment. Subsequently, the doctor prods, pricks, twists, tests, pokes, and gooses, and then leaves you staring at the juxtaposition of your spindly ashen legs and your “lovely” black socks

until she returns to report: *You have to lose some of the weight; cut down on the cocktails; get some regular exercise, and doing pushups with your thumb on the clicker does not count; more fruit, fewer Fritos; and for God's sake, take an actual vacation. I can't make you do it, and I can't promise you there will be no suffering in your future, but there will be less of it.*

Sooo, you can ignore the doctor's advice, and you may not heed all of it, but if you ignore it ... well, don't be surprised or cry foul when life starts circling the drain. The dissonance between the prescription and the lifestyle undermine the physician's value and getting naked in the exam room was all for nothing but embarrassment.

In the same way, week after week we can put it out there – worship God, follow Jesus, read your bible, love your neighbor, alleviate suffering – but if you don't take Sunday into Monday... to what effect were you baptized? And who will there be to offer resistance to the futility and suffering of a self-involved and fracturing world? Dissonance.

But what about congruity? Isaiah says, if you “honor the Sabbath, not going your own ways, serving your own interests, or pursuing your own

affairs ... then your light shall rise in the darkness ... The Lord will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places.” Amen.