

Sermon by The Rev. Betsy Johns Roadman, 12/30/07
St. Augustine's Church, Croton-on-Hudson, New York
Text: John 1:1-18; Collect for the First Sunday after Christmas

Larry and I celebrated Christmas in Portland, Oregon this year. Our oldest son was scheduled to work the day after Christmas, and he didn't want to risk getting stuck on the east coast, if he traveled home for the holiday, in case of a weather event. The rest of us had more flexibility, so we went to him.

Just for the fun of it, Larry and I decided to travel to Portland by train. For three days on the way out and three days on the way back, we spent most of our time in a tiny sleeper compartment reading, talking, thinking, daydreaming, and appreciating the landscape of our country, from the dramatic cliffs of Rocky Mountain National Park to the big sky of Montana.

During our stints on the train, I slowed down. I had to. Nearly every activity of basic daily living that I perform without any conscious thought in my ordinary life required some degree of intentional consideration within the confined space and schedule of the train. I couldn't stride from our compartment to the dining car at my usual pace, because if the train lurched, I'd end up in somebody's lap. I had to walk slowly and carefully. We tried to monitor our movement in our little room, aware of the noise we were making as we laughed, stowed a suitcase, or slammed a door that wouldn't stay closed, because there were other people just a few feet away from us on both sides, separated only by flimsy compartment dividers.

We didn't have internet access, and cell phone service was sporadic, so there were long stretches of uninterrupted quiet time. Occasionally, a stop at a station would be long enough for passengers to get off the train for a few minutes. After many hours on a rocking train in restricted space, taking just a brief walk on solid ground and breathing crisp, fresh air felt like such a gift – a gift that I experience every day of my life and seldom even notice.

Living on a train for those two three-day periods forced me to slow down and to pay attention to what usually completely escapes my notice. It was an odd sort of spiritual retreat. And while I was ready to get off the train when we reached the end of our journey, I'm finding that I'd like to incorporate something of the pace and the intentionality of that experience into my day-to-day life.

In this blessed season of Christmas, we celebrate the light that has come into the world – the bearer of God's life and light – Christ the Lord. We anticipated Christ's coming as we lit each of four candles during the Sundays of Advent. Candles illuminated the darkness during the singing of Silent Night on Christmas Eve. Our Christmas trees are ablaze with light. We proclaim that Christ is the light of the world and that we have received this light. We prayed in today's collect that the light of Christ might be enkindled in our hearts, so that it may shine forth in our lives.

I want to acknowledge and live into the reality of the light of Christ within, not just at the end of December, but ongoing. But if 2008 is anything like 2007 was, it will all-too-soon feel like the light of Christ's coming has been boxed up along with the Christmas tree lights and stored away, as I race headlong into the responsibilities and expectations that regularly crowd my days, such that all too often I feel I barely have the space to breathe. This is not the way I want to live.

In a book called *Sabbath: Restoring the Sacred Rhythm of Rest*,* Wayne Muller writes:

Despite [our] good hearts and equally good intentions, [our] work in the world rarely feels light, pleasant, or healing. Instead, as it all piles up endlessly upon itself, the whole experience of being alive begins to melt into one enormous obligation. It becomes the standard greeting everywhere: I am so busy ... Our lack of rest and reflection is not just a personal affliction. It colors the way we build and sustain community, it dictates the way we respond to suffering, and it shapes the ways in which we seek peace and healing in the world ... With a few notable exceptions, the way problems are solved is frantically, desperately, reactively, and badly.

Muller suggests that our problem is that we've forgotten the Sabbath – intentional time and space built into our lives for the rest that nourishes our soul. All living things require a rhythm of rest. We recognize that intellectually; we have such trouble incorporating it into our lives. Without that necessary rhythm between work and rest, Muller writes,

... we lose our way. We miss the compass points that would show us where to go, we bypass the nourishment that would give us succor. We miss the quiet that would give us wisdom. We miss the joy and love born of effortless delight.

I wish I had more role models to show me how to practice and maintain a Sabbath rhythm. Almost everyone I know has as much trouble with this as I do. But the example of a woman named Hannah inspires and encourages me.

Hannah is a priest with whom I worked for a year when I was a seminary student. She seemed to draw from an inner well of wisdom, strength, and joy. There was a peaceful intentionality about her that never failed to help me feel more at peace when I spent time with her.

When I worked with Hannah, she was the rector of a small but thriving parish. She was involved in community outreach and diocesan projects. She was a spiritual director and an artist. She worked at relationships with her husband, grown children, and many friends. With all of this, she seemed to be able to maintain centeredness even during difficult times. I don't think I ever saw her frantic, utterly exhausted, or resentful about what was on her plate.

This is what I did see: Hannah spent an hour, first thing every morning, painting – which for her was a form of prayer. She regularly took time to exercise – at the gym, the pool, or walking in the woods – no matter how full her day was. She recognized the holy in the

ordinary. When the two of us set aside a morning to think through the coming months of the church calendar, she marked the beginning of our planning time with a celebration of the Eucharist. And Hannah worked at creating sacred space. When I'd meet with her at her home, for lunch or for tea, the table before us would be carefully and thoughtfully prepared, with flowers or some lovely object nearby, and with candles lit. The rhythm of her day flowed between work and rest, activity and reflection, giving and receiving, none of which simply happened. It evolved from her deliberate decisions about how to structure and walk through her days, and it bore abundant fruit. That's how I want to live.

In grateful response to God, whose coming to us we celebrate this Christmas season, how might we keep the light of Christ within us burning brightly? How might we incorporate periods of healing, nurturing Sabbath rest into our hectic days so that our lives truly embody and reflect the peace, the joy, and the love of Christ?

In the moments of silence that we observe following the sermon, may each of us consider two questions? The first is: What is one thing that feeds my soul? The second: How might I make that a regular part of my life? Amen.

*Wayne Muller, *Sabbath: Restoring the Sacred Rhythm of Rest*, Bantam Books, 1999.