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Sabbath-ing Toward Jubilee

By Heather Isaacs

The fourth chapter of Luke begins with the Spirit leading a newly baptized Jesus into the wilderness. While there, he is tempted by the Devil three times: first, to make bread from stones to ease his hunger; second, to take power in exchange for worship of power; and third, to replace faith in God with control over God.

Though the temptations suggest the possibility of creating a world many of us would like to live in—a world without hunger or need *now*; a world that we can move and order according to our will *now*; a world where we never have to ask “Where is God *now*?”—Jesus rejects this world of possibility and, by doing so, reveals what his mission is not about.

From this experience in the wilderness, Jesus returns to Galilee. Full of the Spirit, he begins teaching in the countryside and making his way to Nazareth. On the Sabbath, Jesus goes into the synagogue there and proclaims, through the words of the prophet Isaiah, the *true* purpose of his mission: “The Spirit of the

Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

Then Jesus rolls up the scroll, gives it back to the attendant, and sits down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue are fastened on him, and he goes on by saying to them, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:18–21 NIV). Many scholars agree that the Isaiah tradition to which this passage belongs is taken from the Jubilee mandate in Leviticus 25—and it is deliberately intended by the phrase “the year of the Lord’s favor.”

Jubilee was the year of reinstating debt slaves to their freedom. It was inaugurated every fiftieth year, on the Day of Atonement—the Day of Atonement—when the balance among the individual, community, land, and God was restored. Leviticus 25:10, says, “Consecrate the fiftieth year and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants.” Liberty, in this context, meant economic freedom as well as personal freedom—being restored to one’s community in mind, body, and spirit.

Jubilee, as a radical extension of the Sabbath years, was defined by the broad remission of debts and restoration of debt slaves to their property. The Sabbath years included a number of rest mandates for the land and the people who worked the land. Exodus 23:10–11 reads:

For six years you are to sow your fields and harvest your crops, but during the seventh year let the land lie unplowed and unused. Then the poor among your people may get food from it, and the wild animals may eat what they leave. Do the same with your vineyard and your olive grove.

As my favorite summation of Jubilee states in Leviticus 25:19: “Do not take advantage of one another, but fear your God.”

Though it is debated how often Jubilee was practiced—if at all—the promise of liberation that it provided continues to feed the religious imagination of those willing to sincerely consider God’s design for social and economic relationships.

What can we learn from the Sabbath year and Jubilee practices of letting the poor glean from untended fields and of canceling debts within the community on a regular schedule? What does it mean for us as individuals and as a corporate body to find at-onement? How do our practical needs, cultural ideals, and religious expectations shape our responses to the Jubilee mandate? What holds us back from proclaiming that *this* is the year of the Lord’s favor?

As Christian practitioners of Sabbath, Seventh-day Adventists should have a readily accessible theology of Jubilee. Publication of Roy Branson’s edited volume, *Festival of the Sabbath*, by the Association of Adventist Forums in 1985 suggests that at least a handful of Adventist scholars are apparently sensitive to this need, but their awareness has not fil-

tered out widely among rank-and-file members. The writers of *Seventh-day Adventists Believe* dismiss the significance of the annual Sabbaths and omit the concept of Jubilee altogether. They write:

While the weekly Sabbath was ordained at the close of Creation week for all mankind, the annual sabbaths were an integral part of the Jewish system of rites and ceremonies instituted at Mount Sinai...which pointed forward to the coming of the Messiah, and the observance of which terminated with His death on the cross. (252–53)

Assuming that this supersessionist claim were true and the Jewish system of rites and ceremonies did, in fact, terminate with the death of Jesus on the cross, we are left to grapple with Jesus’ own life and ministry—as represented here in Luke—as an embodiment of Jubilee that cannot be terminated.

In their book, *The Biblical Jubilee and the Struggle for Life*, Ross and Gloria Kinsler write, “the acceptable year of the Lord’ or the ‘year of the Lord’s favor’ that Jesus proclaimed as the coming of God’s reign was no longer strictly one year in seven or one year in fifty but a new age of perpetual liberty for all God’s people from every kind of oppression” (104–5). If this is true, then Jesus did not terminate the practice of the annual Sabbaths; he radicalized them into an ethic of daily living.

Currently, Seventh-day Adventism proclaims Sabbath in its narrow form—as a specific weekly occurrence. Knowing which day is Sabbath and how the Sabbath day should be kept has been central to Adventist identity and theology for the greater part of the Church’s history. Our eschatology gives special importance to the role the seventh-day Sabbath will play at the end of time. And a lot of ink has been spilled defending Saturday as the only true Sabbath.

So the traditional Adventist view of Sabbath needs broadening if we are to embrace the Sabbath/Jubilee mandate. As we are daily and tragically reminded, the Sabbath the world needs is not one day off in seven. Our world can’t take a day off from its poverty, from its wars, from its AIDS. Our communities can’t take a day off from their overcrowded prisons, struggling families, and drug abuse. Our land cannot take a day off from its ecological crises and unsustainable development. In order to meet the world’s pressing and deep needs, we must Sabbath in a new way, and for a different time.

Yet our commitment to keeping the Fourth Commandment may still be a resource for us as we consider a Sabbath/Jubilee theology. Fundamental Belief 19 begins with the statement:

The beneficent Creator, after the six days of Creation, rested on the seventh day and instituted the Sabbath for all people as a memorial of Creation. The fourth commandment of God's unchangeable law requires the observance of this seventh-day Sabbath as the day of rest, worship, and ministry in harmony with the teaching and practice of Jesus, the Lord of the Sabbath.

Being a commandment-keeping people is part of the identity of being Adventist. Yet the meaning of the "fourth commandment" here is found in Exodus 20, where Sabbath keeping is linked to the six-day creation week. But Deuteronomy 5's version of the same commandment, which connects the Sabbath to a history of God's liberating action, is excluded.

If Adventists were to emphasize keeping the "Fourth Commandments," how would our current orientation toward God's good creation—which we celebrate and remember weekly—be challenged by a commandment to remember God's commitment to liberate that same creation each week? How would our relationship to the Sabbath change?

Living out Sabbath/Jubilee is not easy. Perhaps that is why it has been practiced so little. It runs against many of our assumptions about what is fair, what is comfortable, what is right. It's much easier to keep the Sabbath day—with all its unambiguous do's and don'ts—than to live out the radical Sabbath that Jesus himself lived: a Sabbath of healing, liberation, restoration, and justice.

The same temptations that Jesus encountered in the desert meet us on the streets, in our homes, in our churches. David Walsh, author of *Selling Out America's Children: How America Puts Profits before Values and What Parents Can Do*, identifies "six key values that dominate mass media: 1) Happiness is found in having things, 2) Get all you can for yourself, 3) Get it all as quickly as you can, 4) Win at all costs, 5) Violence is entertaining, 6) Always seek pleasure and avoid boredom."

Rejecting these values for those of Jubilee is the practice of Sabbath. Sabbath-ing in this way means



that rather than finding happiness in things, we refrain from the impulses of consumer culture and with more awareness of how our consumer habits can, in the language of Jubilee, cause us to "take advantage of each other." Rather than getting all that you can for yourself—because the world is a dog-eat-dog kind of place and that's just the way it is—we advocate for fair labor practices and living wages for workers in our local and global communities.

Refusing to get it all as quickly as we can, we view rest as a much-needed gift from God and not as a sign of indolence. Instead of winning at all costs, we work for the victories yet to be had in the liberation of humans from spiritual *and* physical slavery. It means that rather than finding violence entertaining or becoming numb to the images on the nightly news, we feel heartbreak for the world and that we speak the best truth we can about the sources of violence found in our own religious traditions and cultural communities.

Rather than always seeking pleasure and avoiding boredom, we find our pleasure in the sometimes difficult pursuits of being still, nurturing our personal relationships, expressing our creative talents, and valuing the earth as God's alone and not ours to do with as we please.



"My reason nourishes my faith and my faith my reason."
—Norman Cousins

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Admittedly, this path of Sabbath-ing toward Jubilee is difficult for any person, family, or organization to navigate in this world. You cannot preach the good news to the poor, proclaim freedom to the prisoners, or release the oppressed without inviting political attention and ire. On the day Jesus spoke in Nazareth, he was rejected by his home congregation.

The Gospel of Luke elaborates further, adding details of a physically violent opposition. Throughout the New Testament, the values of the Kingdom of God that Jesus taught threatened not only the religious establishment of his day but also the political order. It would be his commitment to these values that would eventually send him, and many of his followers, the way of the cross.

Seventh-day Adventists have never had a problem opening themselves up to the idea of persecution—in some ways, our theology invites it as a way of justifying what we believe. During the time of trouble, for example, the true Sabbath keepers will be persecuted—and justified—for their right belief in the right Sabbath day. But for more than 150 years this "time of trouble" has been our theological bogeyman—forever lurking just around the corner but always out of sight.

In light of the biblical vision of Jubilee, which extends from the Hebrew prophets to the early Christian communities, this kind of Sabbath-day theology seems irrelevant and irresponsible. We are living in a time of trouble now—not as Seventh-day Adventists, but as humans. Yet when we preach that Jesus Christ is coming soon to save us, when we believe that justice and redemption are out there, on some distant horizon waiting for Jesus to bring them down with him in the clouds—when we believe all this, we have little to no ethical mandate to change this world for the better now.

But—as it turns out—we do have such a mandate in the Sabbath/Jubilee. How we choose to respond to that mandate determines whether we can truly call ourselves Sabbath keepers.

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