Knowing Our Limits: Sabbath and Sustainability

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Genesis 1:1-5

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind (Spirit) from God swept (hovered) over the face of the waters. Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.
Day 1
Light (Day and Night)

Day 2
Waters and sky

Day 3
Dry land and vegetation

Day 4
Sun, Moon, and stars

Day 5
Sea creatures and birds

Day 6
Land animals and humanity
And God said, "Let the earth sprout vegetation: seed-bearing plants, fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it." And it was so. The earth brought forth vegetation: seed-bearing plants of every kind, and trees of every kind bearing fruit with the seed in it. And God saw that this was good.
Gen. 1:20-25

God said, "Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and birds that fly above the earth across the expanse of the sky." God created the great sea monsters, and all the living creatures of every kind that creep, which the waters brought forth in swarms, and all the winged birds of every kind...
And God saw that this was good. God blessed them, saying, "Be fruitful and multiply, fill the waters in the seas, and let the birds increase on the earth." And there was evening and there was morning, a fifth day.
So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth."
Made in the image of God, we are called to care for the earth as God cares for the earth. God’s command to have dominion and subdue the earth is not a license to dominate and exploit. Human dominion (Gen 1:28; Ps 8), a special responsibility, should reflect God’s way of ruling as a shepherd king who takes the form of a servant (Phil. 2:7), wearing a crown of thorns.

ELCA Statement: Caring for Creation: Vision, Hope, and Justice
Genesis 2:7-8
Then the LORD God formed man (adam) from the dust of the ground (adamah), and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being. And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed.

Genesis 2:15
The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till/work/serve (avad) it and to keep/guard (shamar) it.
Rabbi Yehuda, son of Rabbi Simon, began: “Walk after the Eternal your God.” But can a flesh-and-blood creature walk after the Holy One?...

Rather, from the very beginning of his creation of the world, the Holy One was engaged first of all in planting, as it is written, “The Eternal God planted a garden in Eden.” So should you, too, engage first of all in planting when you enter into the land.

Leviticus Rabbah 25:3
Day 7

Gen. 2:1-3
Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude. And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested (shabbat) on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested (shabbat) from all the work that he had done in creation.

shabbat = to stop, to rest
The endless cycle of idea and action
Endless invention, endless experiment,
Brings knowledge of motion, but not of stillness...

T.S. Eliot, “The Rock”

To rest, we must accept Nature’s limits and our own. When we come to our limit, we must be still.

Wendell Berry,
This Day: Collected and New Sabbath Poems 1979-2012
But as for you, the LORD took you and brought you out of the iron furnace, out of Egypt, to be the people of his inheritance, as you now are.

(Deut 4:20)
Going to the wilderness school

Dan Erlander, “Manna and Mercy”
“In the manna economy, Israel is called upon to engage in two concrete practices of restraint, namely, eschewing excess and keeping Sabbath. These practices might be viewed as the earnest of patience and trust in God.”

*Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture, p. 75*
Sabbath

Exodus 20:8-11

Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work— you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.
Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy, as the LORD your God commanded you. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work—you, or your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock, or the resident alien in your towns, so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you. Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day.
Exodus 23:10-12
For six years you shall sow your land and gather in its yield; but the seventh year you shall let it rest and lie fallow, so that the poor of your people may eat; and what they leave the wild animals may eat. You shall do the same with your vineyard, and with your olive orchard.
Six days you shall do your work, but on the seventh day you shall rest, so that your ox and your donkey may have relief, and your homeborn slave and the resident alien may be refreshed.
Where you grew corn last year,  
Sow buckwheat, let it seed,  
Then disk it in and grow  
A second crop to disk in.  
This is for humus, and  
To keep out weeds. It is  
A Sabbath for the land,  
Rest and enrichment, good  
For it, for you, for all  
The ones who are unborn;  
The land must have its Sabbath  
Or take it when we starve.
A Sabbath of Sabbaths: Jubilee

Leviticus 25:8-18
You shall count off seven weeks of years, seven times seven years, so that the period of seven weeks of years gives forty-nine years. Then you shall have the trumpet sounded loud; on the tenth day of the seventh month—on the day of atonement—you shall have the trumpet sounded throughout all your land. And you shall hallow the fiftieth year and you shall proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you: you shall return, every one of you, to your property and every one of you to your family. That fiftieth year shall be a jubilee for you: you shall not sow, or reap the aftergrowth, or harvest the unpruned vines.
Jubilee: Coming Home

Leviticus 25: 12-16

For it is a jubilee; it shall be holy to you: you shall eat only what the field itself produces. In this year of jubilee you shall return, every one of you, to your property. When you make a sale to your neighbor or buy from your neighbor, you shall not cheat one another. When you buy from your neighbor, you shall pay only for the number of years since the jubilee; the seller shall charge you only for the remaining crop years. If the years are more, you shall increase the price, and if the years are fewer, you shall diminish the price; for it is a certain number of harvests that are being sold to you.
Leviticus 25: 39-41
If any who are dependent on you become so impoverished that they sell themselves to you, you shall not make them serve as slaves. They shall remain with you as hired or bound laborers. They shall serve with you until the year of the jubilee. Then they and their children with them shall be free from your authority; they shall go back to their own family and return to their ancestral property.
Why?

**Leviticus 25:23**
The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants.

**Leviticus 25:42**
For they are my servants, whom I brought out of the land of Egypt; they shall not be sold as slaves are sold.
The Cost of Not Keeping Sabbath

Lev 26:14-15, 33, 34-35

But if you will not obey me, and do not observe all these commandments, if you spurn my statutes, and abhor my ordinances, so that you will not observe all my commandments, and you break my covenant . . . . You I will scatter among the nations . . . . Then the land shall enjoy [or ‘make up for’] its sabbath years as long as it lies desolate, while you are in the land of your enemies; then the land shall rest, and enjoy its sabbath years. As long as it lies desolate, it shall have the rest it did not have on your sabbaths when you were living on it.
Wendell Berry

From the biblical point of view, the earth and our earthly livelihood are conditional gifts. We may possess the land given to us, that we are given to, only by remembering our intimate kinship with it. The condition of the people is indistinguishable ultimately from the condition of the land. Work that destroys the land, diminishing its ability to support life, is a great evil for which sooner or later the punishment is homelessness, hunger, and thirst. For some, the context of this thinking has shifted from religion to science, but the understanding of the land as a conditional gift has not changed.

(This Day, xxii)
Joel Salatin

Industrial-scaled infrastructure is like a fist raised to Creation, saying in effect, “I am not dependent on you. I am man-made, man-serving, man-developed.... A farm that fits in its ecology, in its neighborhood, is an object lesson of gratitude and appreciation, along with a profound dependency on something bigger than human cleverness.”

(The Marvelous Pigness of Pigs)
Isaiah 5:8

Woe to you who join house to house, who add field to field, until there is room for no one but you, and you are left to live alone in the midst of the land!
We who prayed and wept for liberty from kings and the yoke of liberty accept the tyranny of things we do not need. In plenitude too free, we have become adept beneath the yoke of greed.

Those who will not learn in plenty to keep their place must learn it by their need when they have had their way and the fields spurn their seed. We have failed Thy grace. Lord, I flinch and pray, send Thy necessity.
Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy…. Six days you shall do your work, but on the seventh day you shall rest.