



Stewardship in the First Testament

Lesson 2: Sabbath Delight

Overview

This lesson explores sabbath as the culmination of creation and a practice of trust, abundance, and self-limitation. Participants will reflect on how sabbath challenges scarcity thinking and invites lives of generosity, rest, and delight.

Preparation for the Teacher

- Read Genesis 1:1—2:4a ahead of time.
- Watch the video—it may stimulate additional questions appropriate for your context.
- Do a little homework: think of some historical examples of fear leading communities or nations to make bad decisions or to make bad situations worse. Think of some examples where “stepping out in faith” paid off and made things better.

Background

Today’s story portrays the creation of the world as an act of divine generosity and grace. Unlike the Babylonian creation story that serves as its backdrop, the Genesis story paints the picture of a world created in peace, overflowing with abundance.

The very word translated “create,” *bara’* in Hebrew, carries the connotation of “fatness,” that is, prosperity, well-being, and health. In the biblical account, you can’t think of creation without thinking of abundance and well-being.

In stark contrast to the Babylonian story that says human beings are made to be slaves to the gods—to the imperial representatives of the gods—this biblical story says that human beings are created in the image of God to have power, to exercise governance in the world, and to enjoy and honor sabbath rest.

Sabbath rest is the climax, the point of creation, according to this story. The final word is not productive work or limitless consumption. The final word is sabbath rest—quiet, calm appreciation of the glorious world God has created. The final word is self-limitation, the willingness just to stop the frantic busyness of life and enjoy the goodness of a world teeming with abundance and life.

Though we often try to cram eight days of work into a seven-day week, God promises seven days of prosperity for six days of work. It requires a leap of faith to trust that God will provide more than enough for us to survive and thrive. But this story calls us to take just such a leap of faith, to honor sabbath, enjoy life, and trust God's abundant care.

The story thus gives us a clue about how we are to live and to govern in the world as human beings created "in the image of God." At the end of virtually every day of creation, God offers the assessment that what has been created is "good." This Hebrew word *tov* may be better translated "delightful!" God takes delight in creation's every detail, culminating in the creation of human beings, male and female in the image of God, which God describes as "especially delightful!"

As empowered "governors," "stewards" in the world, we are called to delight in creation, to walk in bold confidence that God desires abundant life for all. God calls us to live lives of hope, generosity, and joy.

Pray for your students as you prepare this week's lesson.

Facilitating the Lesson

As the class begins, welcome the class and engage in your usual opening exercises (taking attendance, collecting an offering, prayer concerns, other announcements, etc.).

Opening Activity

Tell the class that, according to the video they are about to watch, the Hebrew word normally translated "good" in the story they are about to read is better translated as "delightful."

Read Genesis 1:1-2:4a and substitute "delightful!" for the word "good" throughout the story.

Scripture Reflection

Read Genesis 1:1-2:4a.

Reflect on how the meaning of the text shifts when "good" is understood as "delightful."

Video Segment

Have the class watch the following videos:

- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SpImYQY8-gE>
- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yA-DRBCdun8>

Discussion Questions

Invite the class to wrestle with the following:

1. Scarcity and Abundance

Economists often speak of “the scarcity problem,” which is rooted in two contradictory realities of the world: human beings have unlimited needs and wants, but the world has limited resources. In an important sense, the biblical creation story addresses the scarcity problem by reframing the issue, flipping the scarcity problem on its head.

The world God desires is a world of abundance where there is more than enough for everyone to survive and thrive because human activity is characterized by sabbath self-restraint. Where human beings see scarcity, God provides lavish abundance. While we always crave more, God calls us to observe limits on work and consumption, to honor sabbath.

- What are some ways we, in our personal life, our congregational life, and our national life, act out of an attitude of scarcity?
- What difference might it make if we could act out of an attitude of abundance? What might we do differently?

2. Reframing Economic Life

It’s important to note that the picture of the world in Genesis 1 is not an accurate depiction of the world as it is. Creation in this story is a completely vegetarian world, for example. Not only humans, but also all the lions and tigers and bears are herbivores (1:29–30). Genesis 1 is, like Isaiah 11:6–9 or Revelation 21:1-22:5, a vision of the world God dreams about, the world God hopes for and calls us to strive to build.

Some have described the workings of the world envisioned by Genesis 1 as “sabbath economics.” It is a way of living in the world that starts from the assumption that it is possible for everyone to have enough to thrive. Scarcity and poverty are not “the will of God.” They are failures of human imagination, departures from the dream God has for the world. Sabbath economics assumes that everyone can have enough. It is grounded in a conscious choice to place limits on our own work and consumption.

- How might we view economic activity differently if we started not from an assumption of scarcity, but from an assumption of abundance and self-limitation?
- What might have to change?
- How might we act differently?
- How might corporations act differently?
- How might nations act differently?
- What would it mean for the way we interact with the rest of creation?
- What are some things we can do on a small scale to start living out “sabbath economics”?

3. Practices of Sabbath and Generosity

- What are some things we might do as individuals, as a congregation, or as a nation to foster attitudes of abundance and generosity?
- How might we support the discipline of sabbath keeping?

Closing Prayer

Close with this prayer or another one you choose:

O God of sabbath delight,

help us live lives of abundance.

Where, in our hearts, there is fear,

fill us with hope.

When, in our fear, we shut down,

open us to new possibilities.

Give us the gift of your vision for the world,

help us dream dreams of

a new creation.

Help us imagine

new ways of living.

Give us the courage to share,

the confidence to know when enough is enough,

the joy to sustain us in the work you have called us to do,

and the good sense to rest.

O God of sabbath,

you are our life and our delight!

Amen.

This is from a set of four lessons written by Rev. Dr. Richard H. Lowery, an ordained Disciples of Christ minister, retired Hebrew Bible professor, and President Emeritus of the Disciples of Christ Historical Society. He examines stewardship from the perspective of the faith of ancient Israel. The lessons advance to touch on Second Testament themes and their connection to the faith of Israel and how these ideas have been adopted and understood by the Church.