

## Everyday Sabbath

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September 18, 2016

### READING

Micah 6:8

Micah is one of what is curiously called the Minor Prophets, not as big a voice as Isaiah, for example, but worth attention. From Michael Coogan, editor of the *New Oxford Annotated Bible*: “Micah offered a theological interpretation of the dizzying events near the end of the eighth century (BCE): the fall of Samaria, the expansion of Jerusalem fueled by emigrants from the north, and the international situation made unstable by an aggressive superpower, Assyria. Micah, from a small town southwest of Jerusalem, Moresheth-gath, had a populist message. He expressed disdain for the corruptions and pretensions of Jerusalem and its leaders. In an era of urbanization, he championed the traditions of early Israel. Micah condemned religious practice untethered from ethical performance. [Still, while he criticized the present situation,] . . . he never lost faith in the future.” These words, from Micah 6:8 can be considered, Coogan shares, “the epitome of the entire Israelite prophetic tradition.”

**He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?**

### SERMON

#### Everyday Sabbath

The Rev. Anne Bancroft

Above my desk at home is a watercolor illustration – one of the StoryPeople pieces by Brian Andreas. It is a character, kind of blob-like, with what looks like a pair of wings, sort of, and an arm that is up high holding this colorful dangling string of baubles, and it reads: “In my dream the angel shrugged and said if we fail this time it will be a failure of imagination and then she placed the world gently in the palm of my hand.”

And I often find myself staring at it and thinking, “Ah! no pressure – just a failure of imagination.” In fact, it doesn’t say fail at “what,” necessarily, though there is the world in the palm of the hand, of course. But I add that weight to his words, I think because the stakes feel very high just now for so many things. . . “if we fail this time it will be a failure of imagination . . . .”

Here’s my thinking. In these days of high stakes, of what feels like unprecedented political discourse that we can hardly make sense of, of inner racial turmoil in our country, of acts of terrorism in the world at large, of climate changes reeking global havoc, not to mention the load of our own lives’ stresses – concerns about money, health, parents, children, our own overwhelm – all of which weigh

on us and are not least of all of the above, we *need* moments of rest, of respite, like now, like today, to sit and breathe together and lay our burdens down for a time . . . but I'm thinking, actually, we need it EVERY day. Imagine our relief if we each rested – physically, emotionally, but also spiritually – every day.

Now, there may be some of you who do have a “rest” practice. And for those of you who may not have it but aspire to it, I would be happy to meet you all here at 10:30 on a daily basis – though for many of us that may not fit the schedule. What is a well-intentioned, thoughtful, and ever-seeking Unitarian Universalist to do?

Our sources tell us, of course, (the six sources from which we draw wisdom, listed in the front of your hymnals!) to seek wisdom in the traditions that have informed us for hundreds if not thousands of years: wisdom from the world's religions, and from Jewish and Christian teachings. Hence, our reading from the Hebrew Scriptures, the prophet, Micah.

When Micah says, in his message to the everyday folks suffering the events of the eighth century BCE, not quite 3,000 years ago – times of suspect leadership and international instability, of shifting demographics due to immigrant relocations (sounds familiar?) and no doubt the stresses and strains of everyday living – when Micah says you know what will help set things right: do justice, love kindness, walk humbly with the spirit of Love that resides within you – might we feel some resonance with his suggestions?

It's all practice, of course: doing justice, or our best shot at it. Living lives of kindness – to our best abilities. Discerning those two can take a chunk of time in and of themselves.

But then, to walk humbly with your G-d, framed more accessibly, perhaps, to walk humbly with the spirit of Love that resides in each of us: what does that look like? And will that help us with our capacity for imagination? How might that inform our need for and coming to rest?

We are wound so tightly – that's what I see in our world. If you read the article that I linked in this week's e-news about Humble Pie, you will recall the words from David Anderson's book, *Breakfast Epiphanies*, in reference to a Sabbath practice: *We live in a world where such attentiveness (to mind and spirit) is not merely undervalued, it is nearly forbidden. The market values workers who will gut out crazy hours and call it commitment, take a pill instead of a rest. . . the stores are always open; we're always working. . .*” at something, I would suggest. Gainful employment or volunteer, shepherding parents or children or friends, gardens or causes. Our state of busy-ness has less to do with the state of our employment, I think, than our habits.

The Sabbath – taking the time to rest and imagine what it is to humbly walk with the spirit of Love that resides in each of us – we need Sabbath – we need it so badly. Remember the Sabbath shuffle we have danced before?

I make an often predictable mistake when I think about the Sabbath. I link the practice of rest – which is one way the Hebrew “Shabbat” is translated – with the practice of prayer. When I feel encouraged to honor the Sabbath, my knee-jerk reaction is often to assume that praying is involved, somehow. Observant Jews are encouraged to pray three times daily. I think of the Muslim practice of praying five times a day. Our Catholic friends honor morning, noon, evening and nighttime prayers. These are all pieces of Sabbath practice – of rest from daily life and concerns.

Years ago, I heard the Rev. Bill Sinkford preach as some of you may have this past June when he offered his wisdom at the Service of the Living Tradition at our annual General Assembly. I’m sure it was a strong and thoughtful sermon, the one that I heard years ago – well, I think it was. But what I really remember best was not his pastoral or prophetic words, but his practice of offering an invitation. “Will you pray with me?” he asks. And every time I hear it, I find myself thinking, “well . . . of course. You asked so nicely, after all – and you make it sound so inviting.” The word prayer is not uncomfortable for me, but in my imagination, even the most committed atheist for whom prayer holds little sway, might well say, “oh . . . yes, well . . . I can do that,” because of the way we have been invited. It is an invitation to possibility, a kind of cleanliness; and, I think it rings true because it feels humbly offered, so it is believable. Nothing is being sold or required. It’s just an invitation. And, it’s lovely. And it feels restful.

But, in truth, a Sabbath practice does not REQUIRE prayer.

I was reminded of this when I was researching a bit more about traditional concepts of Sabbath. We see the idea of rest in Genesis, of course, when the Creator takes the seventh day to rest and observe all that has been accomplished. But we also see it in Exodus, when Moses receives the Commandments.

“. . . The weekly day of rest has no parallel in any other ancient civilization. In ancient times, leisure was for the wealthy and the ruling classes only, never for the serving or laboring classes.” (Judaism 101)

It’s really all about freedom, I was reminded. “. . . slaves did not get days off. Thus, by resting on Shabbat, we are reminded that we are free . . . from our weekday concerns, from our deadlines and schedules and commitments. During the week, we are slaves to our jobs, to our creditors, to our need to provide for ourselves; on Shabbat, we are freed from these concerns, much as our ancestors were freed from slavery in Egypt.”

A reminder, therefore, of all that holds us captive. What holds you these days, captive to the constant drum? Are you able to put it down at least once a week? Might you be able to try it once a day? Make it a prayer, if you like, but mostly just rest.

A card I received recently pictures a camel with a big fish on top. "Sometimes we are like fish out of water – it feels so unfamiliar. Hafiz wrote: First, the fish needs to say, 'something ain't right about this camel ride – and I'm feeling so darn thirsty!"

Why is it so hard for us to remember that moments of quiet might call us back to our better selves, to the selves that have the energy to do justice, to love kindness, to walk humbly with the spirit of Love that is inside each of us. It is not a new concept that we need it. Anderson reminds us: "*We either flatter or deceive ourselves if we believe we are the first generation to struggle so painfully with the balance of work and rest. There's a reason why keeping the Sabbath is one of the ancient Ten Commandments.*" It is a perennially new concept to observe it. How much more so to try to observe it daily!

Gandhi said, "faith is not something to grasp, but a state to grow into." (from Harvard Magazine)

May we grow together in wisdom and love, in joy and compassion – with rest as our guide. Renewed, refreshed, we come back to our being with a different and more imaginative resolve, as we hold the world in the palms of our hands.

So may it be.