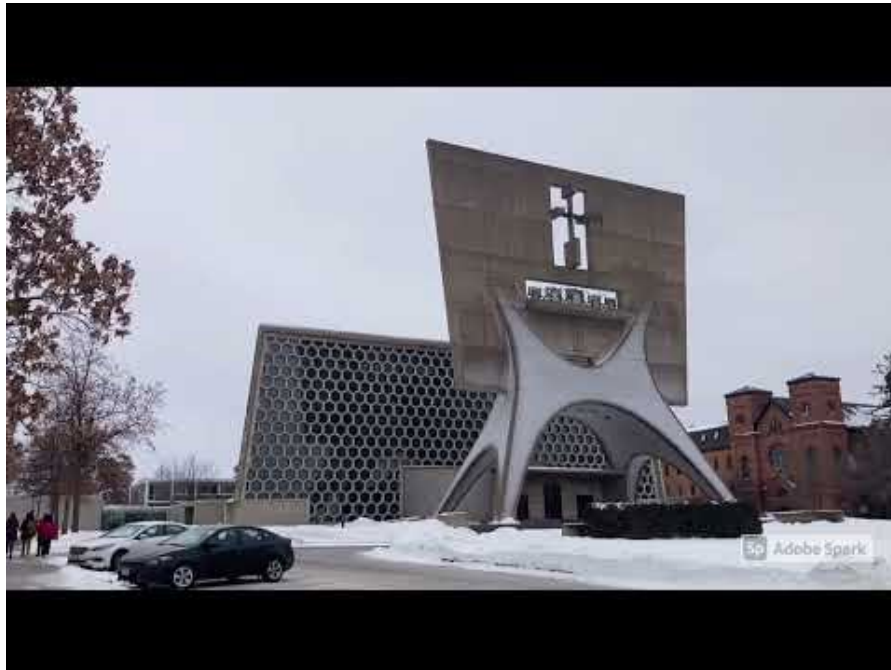


# Sabbath as a Vocational Practice Retreat

A Resource from the [Communities of Calling Initiative](#)

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## Introductory Video



## Schedule Suggestions

### Scheduling Your Time Together

The basic schedule we envisioned when we were creating the retreat materials was a Friday evening and Saturday until nightfall, in line with the Jewish sabbath. Please think about what timing makes sense in your own context, and how you might adapt some of these elements to give your group a good taste of rest, community, spaciousness, prayer, shared meals...

The prayers mentioned will be provided in a worship booklet, as well as outlines for the group conversations.

For the Friday evening conversation, we are suggesting that each person bring a photo or other image of their sense of what a true Sabbath would look like for them, or a reminder of a time when they truly rested, or their aspiration for a time of rest...

The schedule is color-coded to reflect the purposes of the Sabbath:

- REST
- worship
- community
- meals

Day & Time	Activity
<b>Friday evening</b>	Arrival, dinner preparation as needed, getting settled
	Short prayers for entry into Sabbath time and space
	Friday night supper
	Conversation, visio divina with photos, possibly over dinner
	Brief night prayers
	Perhaps set up an area for people who want to stay up and talk – games, handcrafts that they’ve brought, etc.
	REST
<b>Saturday Morning</b>	Short prayers to welcome the morning
	Breakfast
	Conversation 1: Sabbath and one’s own needs
	Open time for reflection and REST
	Conversation 2: Sabbath and the needs of the congregation
	Open time for reflection and REST
<b>Saturday Noon</b>	Lunch
<b>Saturday Afternoon</b>	Time for napping, walking, REST
	Conversation 3: Sabbath and the needs of the world
	Short prayers of intercession & thanksgiving for the day
	Packing up
	Brief gathering for prayers of farewell to the Sabbath, welcoming the week.

### **Biblical Study: Jesus and the Sabbath**

To understand the historical significance of biblical Sabbath observance, it is important to remember how little of Israel's history was spent under home rule. From the Assyrians to the Babylonians to the Persians to the Seleucids, Ptolemies, and the Romans, from the 8th c. BCE through the time of Jesus and beyond, Israel was under foreign domination. The biblical texts are witness to two alternating responses to foreign rule: **accommodation** to foreign rule and **resistance** to foreign rule.

**Sabbath-keeping is a prime example of a practice of resistance**, rooted as it is in God's liberation of the Hebrew people from slavery in Egypt. Weekly observance of the Sabbath is a consistent reminder that God's people are free, no matter what regime they are under. Declaring a regular day on which they do not work set the Jewish people apart from everyone around them, who had their own cycles of festival days, but little chance to stop working altogether.

**Sabbath-keeping is also grounded in God's justice.** The Bible stresses that the Sabbath is for all: for foreign residents in Israel, for every kind of worker, for the land, and for working animals. Sabbath is a constant reminder that God's care is for all, without exception.

**And yet, the full radical potential of the Sabbath could be muted**, so that it did not appear to threaten the reigning authorities. This is the situation Jesus is facing in the Galilean synagogue of Luke 13. From Jesus's perspective, some of the rules being put on Sabbath observance made it more difficult for ordinary people to practice and also less clearly liberative. Far from breaking the Sabbath, Jesus calls people to its empire-challenging purpose: to give people a deep drink of freedom rooted in God's desire for justice for all.

### **A Woman Bent Over**

#### **Luke 13:10-17**

**Luke 13:10** Now Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath.

**11** *And behold:* a woman with a spirit that had debilitated her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was entirely unable to stand up straight.

**12** When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, "Woman, you are released from your ailment."

**13** When he laid his hands on her,  
immediately she stood up straight and began praising God.

**14** But the leader of the synagogue,  
indignant because Jesus had cured on the sabbath,  
kept saying to the crowd,  
“There are six days on which work ought to be done;  
come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day.”

**15** But the Lord answered him and said,  
“You hypocrites!  
Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger,  
and lead it away to give it water?

**16** And ought not this woman,  
a daughter of Abraham  
whom Satan bound for eighteen long years,  
be released from this bondage on the sabbath day?”

**17** When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame;  
and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing.

### *For Reflection:*

The first time you read the passage through, just mark the words that stand out to you. Read it again, and this time, pay particular attention to the verbs.

One way to focus your attention on any passage in the Gospels is to consider it within **three distinct frameworks** of meaning. I think of this practice as comparable to the actions of a scientist working at a microscope. Say the scientist is looking at a bee – the bee is the same all the time, but as the scientist changes the level of magnification, completely different aspects of the bee become visible. Every view is true, and each reveals something distinct about the bee. Similarly, Gospel narratives bear different meanings at different levels or within different frames of magnification: the personal frame, the societal frame, and the theological frame.

## I. The personal frame

- The first frame is the most intimate, the personal framework of the particular people who show up in the passage, with their distinct concerns and values. At the center of this passage is an encounter between Jesus and an unnamed woman whose spine is severely bent over.
- The power of the personal story lies largely in how we are able to enter imaginatively into **the woman's experience**. Even at the personal level, her story is one of individual physical suffering and also a story of the disempowerment of women in first century Galilee, a disempowerment written on women's bodies in a multitude of ways. The two kinds of being "bent over" – the physical and the social – are significant in relation to the purposes of the Sabbath. How can a woman bent over fully answer God's call?
- But notice, too, that the woman's response to her freedom is completely outside the frame of the story. She is spoken to and spoken about, but her own speech and actions have to be imagined. What do you think she does *after* this encounter? If you were there, how might you engage the women afterwards?
- As in many of the Gospel stories, **Jesus** is somewhat mysterious here. We learn of him mainly through his verbs: He *saw* the woman, he *called her* to him, he *laid hands* on her in a gesture of healing. What he proclaims to her is *release*, a term that is used three times in this short passage.
- Is Jesus working, or is he simply opening space for the liberative purposes of the Sabbath to hold sway? He compares what he's doing to untying a working animal and leading it to water on the Sabbath, an action that was permitted.
- Jesus is teaching the listeners how to apply the scriptures graciously and mercifully to present-day issues. Here, he seamlessly links God's concern for people and animals, revealing acts of compassion as intrinsic to Sabbath shalom.
- The woman is released from a spirit that has bound and bent her, but she is not the only person here whom Jesus may be trying to release. He turns to **the onlookers**, a local religious leader and others, who see his actions as defying the Sabbath. Jesus uses a classic Jewish form of reasoning, from the lesser to the greater, to invite them into a more deeply rooted and liberating practice of Sabbath.
- There is another set of onlookers, a **"crowd,"** who rejoice at what Jesus is doing. Why are they able to rejoice, when the leaders seem to feel threatened?
- In the Sabbath encounter between Jesus and the woman, we have a chance to see the power of God's concern for justice and well-being for every person, and Sabbath-time is an integral part of the story. She is restored within the holy space of Sabbath *rest*, a fact that might cause us to wonder exactly what the spirit was that had her bent over.

## II. The Societal Frame

- In the second part of the story, when Jesus is engaging the local leaders, he refers to the woman as **a daughter of Abraham**. In doing so, honors the woman in the presence of the people around them, but he also **pulls her story up into the larger story of Israel**.
- Israel, too, was bound and bent over under Roman occupation, with its layers of taxation, loss of the land by small farmers, debt slavery, poverty, hunger, sickness, and encroachment upon the Jews' deepest values, as we see in Jesus's arguments with the religious leaders over interpretation of the Torah.
- Radical Sabbath observance—grounded in the people's essential freedom and their commitment to God's justice—is key to Israel's healing.
- **As in the first century, true Sabbath observance is politically and socially radical in our time.** It resists identifying people primarily as consumers or as individuals, and grounds us in community, in prayerful awe of the freely given creation, in time for reflection, in delight. The doorway into the Sabbath may be marked with discipline, but the space that opens up on the Sabbath is one of pure freedom to receive the goodness of creation, true Shalom.
- Sabbath is a space marked out for the fruit of the Spirit to thrive, as Paul describes it in Galatians: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-discipline.
- The story asks us to enter into the nobility of our own identity as God's people, heirs of the whole history of faithfulness.

## III. The theological frame

- The encounter begins with the words, "And behold: a woman..." In her book, *Silence: A User's Guide*, Maggie Ross calls the use of *idou* (behold! look!) in the Gospels a sign that the reader should stop and take some silence here to prepare to receive a Word of God. The NRSV masks the importance of this term, choosing instead to say, "And just then..."
- For us, *behold* may serve as an invitation to leave enough space of quiet in our reading to invite God's presence with us so that we may discern how the transcendent God is present in and through the story, and present to and within us as we read and reflect.
- **What invisible powers are present?** There is the spirit that has had the woman "bound" and weakened for eighteen years. There is the invisible but palpable power of fear that is causing the local leadership to lose sight of the revolutionary potential of the Sabbath, the potential to do justice even in the midst of a destructive foreign occupation. And there is the power of God present through Jesus as he touches the woman and also argues his case with the leaders.

- Paying attention to the theological and spiritual dimensions of the story helps us decipher and negotiate the full reality in which we are also trying to channel God's grace and creativity in our time and place.
- What invisible but powerful social forces have bound and bent ourselves and others? What invisible but powerful forces keep us from acting as courageous channels of God's grace and creativity? If we were to institute a regular Sabbath practice, how might we become a means of release (liberation) for ourselves and our communities?
- What part of this story resonates with you? What part is still confusing, mysterious, or off-putting? How will you respond to the story in your own life?

## Sabbath Learnings



Sabbath Learnings -  
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## Sabbath Check List

### Basic Questions About Your Sabbath Practice

1. How long will your Sabbath be?
2. How will you signal the beginning and ending of the Sabbath?
3. Who will practice Sabbath with you?
4. How will you handle meal preparation?
5. What activities will you rest from? (e.g., spending money, driving a car, using social media, etc.)
6. What activities will you specifically engage? (e.g., prayer, special meals, hospitality, time in nature, time with friends and family, pastimes or hobbies, etc.)

## A Sabbath Checklist

This checklist is adapted from one created by Paul Hawken<sup>1</sup> for thinking about responding effectively to the climate crisis. He was inspired by Atul Agawande's checklist for responding to complex problems in healthcare. If Sabbath-keeping is to be an effective response to the complex challenges of our time, then it may be helpful to have a similar checklist for gauging whether or not we are on track.

1. Does your practice give you a taste of deep rest?
2. Does your practice of Sabbath enhance your experience of freedom/release?
3. Does it restore your connection to the land and other creatures?
4. Does it deepen your sense of calling, even if it challenges the particular ways you've responded so far?
5. Does it build your connection to other workers?
6. Does it serve human needs or manufacture human wants?
7. Does it build your connection to the poor?
8. Does it promote the fundamental rights of others?
9. Does it build your capacity for compassion?

You may want to record your experience over time, to be able to get a sense for the ongoing effect of Sabbath observance on your larger-scale commitments.

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<sup>1</sup> *Tricycle* magazine, winter 2021, p.70