



Sabbatical Time

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Ephn4:1 – 16 John 6: 24-35

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I want to begin by thanking you for the sabbatical time I've had the privilege to enjoy. In some industries, like the church, sabbatical time's normative, but it's not a normal to all. I've come to appreciate the value of such time.

Sabbatical time is founded in the biblical practice of shmita (literally release). Related to agriculture, according to Leviticus 25, Jews in the Land of Israel must take a year-long break from working the fields every seven years. The word derives from Sabbath, with Greek and ultimately Hebrew etymological roots, it connotes rest. A rhythm of seven, echoed in our weekly cycle, even as a day of rest part's bit hard to discern these days.

To begin with it was hard to unhook from the anxiety that I should be 'doing' something, this wasn't a holiday yet it wasn't work. I wonder whether the Covid lockdown effect contributed to this. You were at home, yet working, yet not working in accustomed ways. Many people use a sabbatical as an opportunity to travel overseas. To connect with colleagues or people who share similar ministry contexts, to engage in a course of study in an area of interest. Or simply being removed to a distant physical location gained space from the familiar.

Well the Covid world situation wasn't going to allow me the chance to travel internationally. I knew this from the outset. I had thoughts of relocating to other parts of NZ. However early on, while out walking the dogs, following one of our familiar routes and wrestling with the boring sameness of things and pondering 3 months of the same the

thought arose, “what did I actually need from a sabbatical?” It’d be nice to travel new places, meet new people, experience new things, explore and learn from other contexts and landscapes. But these could also be distractions, a means for me to keep busy rather than use this time to reflect and rest.

When we think of landscapes, we tend to think of physical ones, those outside and around us. But there are also inner landscapes. Sabbatical a time to pause, to rest and to explore that inner landscape where all those crowding questions, wonderings, doubt arose. Those things you say you hope to reflect on later because you’re too busy now.

A bit like the guidance given for meditation or Yoga Nidra in sabbatical one is to assume an upright yet relaxed posture, or enter a state of relaxed awareness but not go to sleep. As it unfolded sabbatical time became a time to let such wonderings unfold. Rather than a pursuit of certainty, or an acquisition of intellectual knowledge, it allowed time to let things surface, to live with them, to see what they might be asking of me, what direction I may be being led. To sit with questions and doubts about such things as: if we were to strip away all the trappings and special language of church what are we left with, what is it we bear? **Is** there a continuing role for church, what has it to contribute, what would happen if I couldn’t articulate of God with **certainty**, did it change the way things are, who decides the way things are? Just little things like that, the sort of things a person in the role I have is perhaps not meant to ask much less articulate publicly. But here I am, my prayer cushion my anchor through all these musings.

During this time I acquired a camera to photograph things to later use for artwork. Interestingly, when you wander about with a camera and the intention to take photographs, it changes how you look and see the world around you. I looked at many a beautiful scene and perfect photo opportunity but these weren’t always or usually the things that drew my attention. Later, when I looked at the photo’s I’d taken they seemed to show me something about myself. About how I saw the world, what I noticed and looked for. I

seemed to notice quirky things that didn't fit, cheek by jowl things often sharply contrasting with one another, an odd angle that revealed a different way of seeing the connection between things of how things are that may not match our expectations. Now, I'm no award winning photographer and I'm sure we all have our idiosyncrasies in the photographic compositions. But have you ever considered looking at the photos you've taken and wondering what they might show about how you see things, what you look for, maybe something about yourself?

I wondered on this, where it might lead, what it might be directing me to do. Then it occurred to me if this is what I notice, what I look for and see, if I think it's telling me something about who I am, then maybe I'm drawn to pay attention to those who don't fit, to see a different angle and the connections this reveals, to ask the why of cheek by jowl sharp contrast.

[All this may seem a little introspective, especially for those who prefer to actually do something, not just sit around reflecting and talking about things. After all isn't being actively engaged what St Matthew's is known for after?

Elizabeth Lesser in her wonderful book *Cassandra Speaks: When Women Are the Storytellers, the Human Story Changes* coins the term innervist, a matched pair to activist. Lesser describes an activist as "someone interested in healing and changing the world" and an innervist as "the part of me that seeks inner change, inner healing."

Activism she describes as "anything you do to serve a cause greater than yourself, 'Love made visible'" (Kahlil Gibran). Innervism is "love of oneself. It is the realization that healing the self and healing the world go hand in hand. Sometimes the very evils we want to fight in the world, the broken behaviours we blame on others are also alive in us and in need of our attention, our kindness, our understanding,

our healing.” Lesser “has never regarded activism and innervism as mutually exclusive. In fact, one keeps that other in check. “¹

Last week Helen challenged us with the question about who, or perhaps what, decided that some people were deemed to be included and some not. I think we’d like for this to be otherwise, for there to be a simple fix. It’s like this because of the way we are, the way our society **that we create each day is**. Activism needs innervism as uncomfortable as that may be for us, whether we’re wrestling with poverty, homelessness or our climate emergency, prejudice, inequity or injustice in their many guises.]

Today’s gospel has Jesus say to those clamouring at him, “You’re looking for me not because you saw signs but because you ate your fill.” Their hectoring continues, “What must we do ... what sign are you going to give us so we can see and believe ... what work are you performing ... give us that bread always.” Doing, seeing, proving, performing, give us what we want on the terms we want it and we’ll believe. They, perhaps like us, want to be given, to take, to get, to have. There’s a deep longing for ... something, always out of reach, somewhere else. Maybe Jesus is crying out, “Wake up!” Stop, notice what you have, what’s **being** given, all that’s needed is here, now. If last week’s gospel is to be believed, there’s enough among us for each to be filled according to their need. Maybe it’s time for us to notice and to learn to receive.

So I invite you take time to notice. Take time to notice what you notice. Take time to ask whether it tells you something about who you are. You’re not somewhere else waiting to happen. Who you are, is here, what you have to give is with you now, where you are to give you already know.

¹ Lesser, E. (2020). *Cassandra speaks: When women are the storytellers, the human story changes*. Harper Wave, an imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers, 133- 135.