



## Sabbath and the Care of Creation

By Terry Chapman

“THERE ARE FEW IDEAS IN THE WORLD OF THOUGHT WHICH CONTAIN SO MUCH SPIRITUAL POWER AS THE IDEA OF SABBATH.”<sup>1</sup>

Abraham Heschel could not have known in 1951 when he penned these words, how critical it would be for 21st century people to tap into the power of Sabbath. For it is in the Sabbath that we find the wisdom to face the most challenging question of our day, “How can human beings live as responsible and faithful people in the world without destroying it?”

First, let’s be clear, the practice or, to use a biblical term, the “keeping” of Sabbath is not just another lifestyle option or one more thing to check off a list of the top ten things that if done will make one happy, wealthy and wise. It is an imperative rooted in the very essence of creation. The keeping of Sabbath is not anthropocentric but cosmocentric. When we forget or refuse to keep the Sabbath, not only do we suffer, the intricate tapestry of the cosmos begins to unravel as evidenced in the current environmental crisis in which we live.

Though Sabbath is particular to the Hebrew and Christian traditions, the archetypal rhythm of work and rest is so vital to humanity that it is found in virtually all religions. In order to be fully human, and for the sake of the Earth, people must find the rhythm of work and rest, creation and completion. The survival of the planet hinges on our remembering to keep the fourth commandment as a regular, public, disciplined proclamation that production and consumption is not what it means to be human.

One of the Big Ten, the fourth commandment to keep the Sabbath is the only command that is expressed differently in the two versions of the Ten Commandments found in Exodus and Deuteronomy. It is in these two accounts we

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find the two core reasons why Sabbath practice is so essential.

In the Exodus account (Ex. 28:8-11) the Sabbath imperative to rest is rooted in and empowered by the divine indicative of rest. The motivation to keep the Sabbath lies in the remembering of God’s self-disclosure as a God who rests. Walter Brueggemann notes, “God is not a workaholic; Yahweh has no need to be more secure, more sufficient, more in control, or more noticed. It is ordained in the very fabric of creation that the world is not a place of endless productivity, ambition, or anxiety.”<sup>2</sup> When the dominant culture is built on a system of productivity and control as the way to socio-economic well being, Sabbath practice becomes a counter-cultural act that announces an alignment to a different standard, one that is attuned to the God of creation and the creation of God. When this horizontal and vertical relationship is jarred out of alignment by endless and unsustainable productivity,

*Continues on page 2 >*

### In This Issue

Uplifting the Sacredness of Creation in Worship	3
Remember the Sabbath	4
Earth Sabbath	5
BOOK REVIEW: <i>Sabbath, Finding Rest, Renewal and Delight In Our Busy Lives</i>	6
Kitchen Table Sabbath	6
What We Can Learn From the Birds and the Bees	7
2010 Conferences to Explore	7
PEC Membership and Renewal	8



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### Steering Committee

#### MODERATOR:

Jenny Holmes  
(503) 281-8175  
jehrestore@aol.com

#### VICE MODERATOR:

Bill Bowman  
(502) 452-9151  
billb2623@bellsouth.net

#### TREASURER:

Sue Smith  
(732) 291-3343  
suzesmith@verizon.net

#### UPDATE:

David Brookman  
(812) 386-0733  
brookman@gibsoncounty.net

### Regional Representatives

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John Preston  
(315) 865-4623  
parkbooker@aol.com

#### SOUTHEAST:

Kate McGregor Mosley  
(404) 378-9327  
klmosley@bellsouth.net

#### MIDWEST:

Jerry Rees  
(913) 568-4250  
reesveenstra@aol.com

#### SOUTHWEST:

Martha Rogers  
(512) 345-3969  
rogers33@swbell.net

#### NORTHWEST:

Richard Melin  
(1-800) 618-6553  
rick@presbyinw.org

#### AT-LARGE MEMBER:

CarolAnn Schlich  
(912) 222-5782  
schlichssi@bellsouth.net

#### COORDINATOR

Julie Lehman  
(828) 713-5767  
PECJulie@gmail.com  
15 Cisco Road  
Asheville, NC 28805

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## Sabbath and the Care of Creation (cont. from page 1)

fueled by greed, all creation groans. It is only in the regular and rhythmic Sabbath pause which is the cessation of productivity, that an essential cosmic realignment can take place.

The fourth commandment in Deuteronomy (Deut 5:12-15) begins with the command to “keep” or “observe” whereas the Sabbath command in Exodus begins with the imperative “remember.” In Deuteronomy the motivation to keep the Sabbath lies in the Covenant. It is in the keeping of Sabbath that we remember God’s redemptive actions. This memory is a prerequisite to our ability to live as people of the covenant. When we forget the Sabbath we forget who we are, and the whole cosmos suffers. This is reflected in such rabbinical sayings as: “More than Israel kept the Sabbath, the Sabbath has kept Israel.” “The perfect Sabbath rest is the attuning of the heart to the comprehension of God.”

Jurgen Moltmann sums up the centrality of Sabbath, “The goal and completion of every Jewish and Christian doctrine of creation must be the doctrine of the Sabbath; for on the Sabbath and through the Sabbath God ‘completed’ his creation, and on the Sabbath and through it, men and women perceive as God’s creation the reality in which they live and which they themselves are.”

Everything depends on human beings embracing these two essential Sabbath truths: God paused for breath and so should we, because when we do, we remember who we are. When Sabbath is embraced as a core practice in our lives we can face the future as faithful and responsible stewards of creation and participants in God’s plan to complete what God began in creation.

*Terry Chapman is the Pastor of Forked River Presbyterian Church (NJ), a Spiritual Director and Retreat Leader. For Terry’s Sabbath Journey resource, see his blog: <http://sabbathjourney.typepad.com>.*

1. Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath: its meaning for modern man*. Expanded ed. 1951, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Young.), 101.

2. Walter Brueggemann, *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. 1, Exodus, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 845.

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### ***Do you have a story to share?***

We are always looking for stories and typically take articles of 400 words or less.  
The next submission date is February 1. *Send your ideas to [PECjulie@gmail.com](mailto:PECjulie@gmail.com)*

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## Uplifting the Sacredness of Creation in Worship

By Jerry Rees

**I**N DIALOGUE WITH INDIVIDUALS AND GROUPS, I try to make the case that for a church to respond faithfully and effectively to environmental degradation and climate change, there must be a faith component that comes from worship. I suggest that the **single most significant action** that churches can take on behalf of the environment is to address in worship the crisis and its impact on God's Creation and God's People, especially the least among us. The idea is to **move people from denial to hope to action.**

Faith communities can play the unique role of taking us beyond our enlightened self-interest down an **ethical, moral, and spiritual** path that other institutions do not. They are key in addressing the moral imperative of the environmental crisis, leading **by example, by education, and by inspiration.** They can influence people to transform their way of thinking and believing, which can transform their way of **living and acting.** This is what makes us different from Greenpeace or the Sierra Club.

Regarding the environment, I suggest that there is a constituency within most churches: an untapped wellspring consisting of concentric circles of **interest, support, and advocacy.** I suggest further that there is a segment of the unchurched population that would be attracted to a church that incorporates creation care into its mission and ministry.

During my 10 plus years of environmental activism, my experience has been that whenever a church presents an educational event on any topic, 10, 20, 50, occasionally 100 people may attend, whereas a worship service on any given Sunday can reach many times that number. In weekly worship, there is a **recurring, ready-made, receptive audience.** This means the **most effective way to deliver environmental education and inspiration is through worship,** by incorporating elements of earth-keeping and environmental justice into our worship experience, by presenting worship services focusing on the sacredness of creation through **song, liturgy, prayer, and sermons.**



*Field trip during 2009 Faith and Environment conference at Montreat*

**Faith communities can play the unique role of taking us beyond our enlightened self-interest down an ethical, moral, and spiritual path that other institutions do not.**

I believe that there is a significant segment of our population that would change their attitude and lifestyle if they were better informed and inspired, if they were given hope and encouragement that they could make a positive difference. What is lacking is education, inspiration, and leadership!

Unchecked climate change has been compared to a world war or a great depression. According to the UN, **“There are at least 20 million environmental refugees worldwide—more than those displaced by war and political repression.”** This number could increase 10 fold. The effects of climate change disproportionately hurt the lives of the poorest and most vulnerable among us.

Since the mid 1800s, major social change such as the abolition of slavery, women's suffrage, and the civil rights movement has been fueled by religion and people of faith. In the words of Martin Luther King, speaking out publicly for the first time against the Vietnam War: **“A time comes when silence is betrayal.”**

**Earth Day 2010 Worship and celebration materials are available from the National Council of Churches.** See <http://ncccojustice.org/resources/index.php#earthdaysundayresources>

**PEC recommends the Ring 350 service prepared by Tustin Presbyterian in CA as a template for an Earth Day Sunday service.** See [www.tustinpresbyterian.org/images/Ringing350partf.pdf](http://www.tustinpresbyterian.org/images/Ringing350partf.pdf)



## Remember the Sabbath

By Peter Sawtell, Executive Director, Eco-Justice Ministries

Excerpted from *Eco-Justice Notes, the E-Mail Newsletter of Eco-Justice Ministries*, originally distributed 5/18/2007.

**A**MONG THE MANY EMBARRASSING MOMENTS IN MY life, there's the occasion of a horribly botched joke.

During an after-hours social gathering at a church meeting, I told a long, convoluted story, embellishing the details and dragging the narrative out as it moved toward its surprising conclusion. At long last, and with a great flourish, I delivered a closing line, then leaned back for the laughter. My friends, though, just sat there, staring at me. After a few moments, my wife (bless her heart), said, "Uh, Peter? Aren't you forgetting something?"

When I gave her my own blank stare, she then provided the real punch line for the story. The uproarious laughter that followed was only partly for the lame joke, and mostly for my bungling of its telling.

**W**henver there's a discussion of Christian environmental theology, the Genesis 1 creation story is sure to be mentioned. All too often, though, the way that beautiful narrative is addressed is very much like my telling of the joke.

The six-day sequence of creation is described, and at the end, an almost-final line is put forth with a wise nod and the assurance that now we know the meaning of life. But the punch line that completes the story isn't told, and the true meaning of the story is lost.

Some tellers of Genesis 1 come to a screeching halt with the affirmation that "It was very good." The beauty and integrity of creation is rightly affirmed. Other tellers find the point of the story in those words about "dominion" and "subdue." They highlight a role of human power over the creation.

But, in either case, if the account of creation stops on the sixth day, we miss the point of the whole story. For, on the seventh day, God establishes Sabbath. That is the crowning accomplishment which completes the meaning of the entire narrative.

Charles Milligan, my immensely wise friend and philosopher, noted, "Each of the days of creation is good, and the whole of creation together is very good. But the Sabbath is different from good; it is holy."



*Member photo from native plant identification hike during 2009 conference.*

**Each of the days of creation is good, and the whole of creation together is very good. But the Sabbath is different from good; it is holy.**

The Priestly writers of this creation story were passionately concerned with holiness. For them, the Sabbath day of rest and renewal was of utmost importance in creating that state of being. The significance of Sabbath—and the related periods of seven days, seven years, and Jubilee at seven-times-seven years—runs throughout the scriptures as a hallmark of what it means to live in right relationship with God and the community.

Just as I had missed the stunning importance of the seventh day of creation until Charles opened my perception, I also had not grasped the depth of a genuine Sabbath observance. My weak notion of "resting" is probably why I didn't see Sabbath as all that significant.

I had tended to think of the Sabbath day of rest as sort of like a "day off" from work. It is an opportunity to take a break from vocational obligations, and do other things. For most of us, the day off is a busy day, when errands are run and a multitude of projects are undertaken in the house and yard. There may be a change of pace, and a shift of focus, but there's still a lot of "doing" to be done. That isn't the meaning of Sabbath at all.

My awareness was expanded a few years ago when some Jewish friends spoke about their recovery of a

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genuine Sabbath observance. They helped me to understand the rich discipline of a weekly day when nothing is "done," and when there's a prohibition against "accomplishing" anything. The Sabbath is a day to be in relationship with family and friends and the creation, to rest and reflect, to laugh and play. All of the traditional prohibitions about what cannot be done on the Sabbath are designed to establish clear boundaries so that the true purpose of Sabbath rest can be maintained.

The Sabbath is a sharp contrast to the pervasive social values which focus on production and achievement. Sabbath calls us into a centered state of being fully human within community. The Sabbath rest provides a space for all of creation—for all creatures and the land—to be restored into right relationships of justice and wholeness.

If we're going to look to Genesis 1 for insights about how to live in faithful relationship with God and the creation, we must take the seventh day seriously. God rested, because creating and doing is not the most important thing. Being a thankful, joyous and centered part of the Earth community is the point of the story, and of faithful living.

May we all allow Sabbath rest and renewal to be part of our lives, for in that resting we discern the deepest meaning of life, and we bring healing to ourselves and the planet.

**THE PRESBYTERY OF GREATER ATLANTA passed a resolution this month that seeks to end our dependence upon coal that is mined through mountain-top removal (MTR). The resolution specifically supports a bill currently before the Georgia legislature (HB 276) that would ban MTR coal and cease funding for future coal-fired power plants GA. The effort was led by Earth Covenant Ministry and its supporting churches.**

## EARTH SABBATH

The following excerpts were drawn from a sermon entitled *Earth Sabbath* by Rev. Dr. G. Daniel Little, which was preached at Village Church on June 9, 1996 while he served as interim pastor.

The sermon focused on the sacredness of biodiversity. While playing "*Lord of the Dance*," the organist progressively removed various organ stops to analogize the loss of biodiversity. This piece of the worship service was inspired by a segment on National Public Radio which used a full orchestra. Instead of removing organ stops, musical instruments went quiet, went "extinct."

Some may remember Dr. Little as past President of McCormick Theological Seminary in Chicago. These excerpts will serve as a tribute to his faithfulness and insight regarding God's creation and God's people.

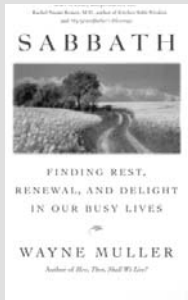
"The term 'Earth Sabbath' means more than a day to think ecologically in worship; it means that the earth itself needs a sabbath, needs to rest. It means that the periodic sabbath reflects the character of the Creator, as all plants flower and are barren; as all creatures exert and relax, live and die. . . .

Our alienation from the sabbatic rhythms of creation is deeply rooted in the rational spirit of the Enlightenment, in the controlling spirit of the Protestant work ethic, and in the guilty spirit of a Calvinist faced with a "wasted" moment or an idle piece of ground. Our churches are temples of the Enlightenment, engines of the Protestant work ethic, and factories of Calvinist guilt!

It's beginning to dawn on us that the earth will not have its Sabbath until we human beings begin to claim and enjoy ours. . . . If we don't choose our Sabbath voluntarily, creation will respond to the strain we put on the environment by, among other things, hastening the depletion of biodiversity—and will take its Sabbath, without us!"

—Submitted by Jerry Rees

## BOOK REVIEW



### **SABBATH** **Finding Rest, Renewal and Delight In Our Busy Lives**

*By Wayne Muller*

REVIEWED BY MARTHA ROGERS

Wayne Muller is an ordained minister and therapist and founder of **Bread for the Journey**, which is a beneficiary of the book sale proceeds.

*“We invite a time in which we can taste what we have been given, take delight in what we already have, and see that it is good... In quiet stillness we can identify our genuine needs with more precision, and separate them more easily from our mindless wants and desires.”*

**B**OTH INSPIRING AND PRACTICAL, *SABBATH* (New York: Bantam, 2000) calls us to a time to be nourished and refreshed, to become available to the insights and blessings of deep mindfulness that arise only in stillness and time. In our culture of consumption and accomplishment, there is tremendous guilt associated with taking time to rest. Sabbath gives us permission to balance rest and work. Sabbath can be a joyful blessing, a time for play, for deepening relationships, for listening, for wisdom and inner music, for intentional silence, for thankfulness.

Muller challenges our culture of accumulation, observing that the Gospel of Consumption begets the Advertising Industry. Advertising says, “You are not enough.” While promising happiness, it sells dissatisfaction.

The *Practices* provided at the end of each chapter helped me to put aside some of my busyness and take time to savor the creation. During one of those times, I wrote “Kitchen Table Sabbath,” which appears in this **Update** issue (see inset). I will also use the book as the primary resource for a small group discussion.

I am finding that often wisdom *does* come in the silence. Thank you, Rev. Muller, for calling us back to the concept of Sabbath.

### **Kitchen Table Sabbath**

After a long drought in Central Texas, I was listening to and watching the slow, gentle rain as I ate my breakfast at the kitchen table. The birds also seemed happy to see the rain, as they dined at our feeders and bathed in the stone birdbath that had been a gift to my husband many years ago.

I noticed that my thoughts shifted from enjoyment to observing that the shrubs needed trimming, the weeds needed pulling, the soil needed amending. The “to-do” list started to form. The window needed washing, the birdbath needed cleaning, the birdfeeders needed filling.

Remembering the concept of Sabbath, I let go of the “to-do” list for the moment and returned to my enjoyment of the rain and the creatures. Plenty of time later to weed and feed the garden. Daily Sabbath and living in the present nourish my soul and create a place of peace from which to live my day.

*Martha Rogers*  
*October 21, 2009*



*Martha Rogers, PEC Steering Committee member  
and SW regional representative*

**Let PEC know if your Presbytery is planning an environmentally focused overture for the 2010 General Assembly or if you would like to concur with an overture of another Presbytery.**

Contact PEC moderator, Jenny Holmes to receive the latest information at [jehrestore@aol.com](mailto:jehrestore@aol.com) (503) 281-8175

## What We Can Learn from the Birds and Bees

Submitted by David Brookman

The following excerpts were drawn from a sermon entitled *What We Can Learn from the Birds and Bees*, which was preached by Rev. Kevin Fleming, pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Evansville, Indiana, on September 27, 2009. The text was Job 12:7-10.

The language of science tends to be prose. The language of science needs to be specific, exact, and precise. Science seeks to remove every trace of ambiguity and uncertainty . . . The language of faith, however, tends to be poetry. The use of poetic, even metaphorical, language is our bread and butter. We speak of God in many ways . . . We employ anthropomorphisms—the assigning of human qualities to non-human beings and things. We read the remnants of cultures and customs of long ago and feel the conflict they create when seen through a 21st century lens. We see the scriptures as a combination of God’s Word and the experiences of people of faith. People of faith are called to avoid the literalism of prose and read the sacred word with an ear for the poetic—the powerful—the mystical and spiritual.

The created world around us declares the reality and complexity of the God who made the earth and all within it. That is not prose. That is poetry. But faith—theology—is best written in poetry. The world around us . . . the animals, the birds, the plants, the fish—it all cries out that the hand of the Lord has done this. And that same hand that created also sustains. The hand that formed the earth and its

inhabitants is the same hand that cares for the earth and its inhabitants. The world around us—in all its simplicity and in all its complexity—points us to God, reveals God to us, calls us to live in the knowledge that, while we may never know when, or how, or where, behind all the creative forces that have ever been at work in the universe, stands God.



PEC conferee on garden tour

What can we learn from the birds and bees? If nothing else, we can learn that God is. Earth’s amazing plants and animals move us to wonder and amazement, which can very often lead us to God, in whose hand is the life of every living thing and the bread of every human being . . . And they teach us a deeper lesson: unless we are careful, very careful, we can destroy it all. Unless we accept the stewardship of the earth, placed into our hands by God, the earth and its creatures—including us—will disappear.

*But ask the animals, and they will teach you; the birds of the air, and they will tell you; ask the plants of the earth, and they will teach you; and the fish of the sea will declare to you. Who among all these does not know that the hand of the Lord has done this? In his hand is the life of every living thing and the breath of every human being.*

### 2010 PRESBYTERIAN ENVIRONMENTAL CONFERENCES TO EXPLORE:

- \* **Ecumenical Advocacy Days Conference**  
March 19-22, Washington, D.C.  
The eco-justice track information is @  
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- \* **Keeping Tahoe Blue and the Creation Green**  
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[www.zephyrpoint.org](http://www.zephyrpoint.org)

- \* **Earth Honoring Faith**  
June 21-27, Ghost Ranch (New Mexico)  
[www.ghost ranch.org](http://www.ghost ranch.org)
- \* **PC(USA) General Assembly 2010**  
July 3-10, Minneapolis, MN
- \* **2010 Eco-Stewards Program**  
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We host a luncheon for current and prospective members and host an exhibition table. Contact PEC coordinator, Julie Lehman for more information @ [PECjulie@gmail.com](mailto:PECjulie@gmail.com).