

In a scene from the *Christopher Robin* movie, Christopher Robin and Winnie the Pooh have a conversation about enjoying doing nothing. For the Jewish or Christian listener, this idea of doing nothing on purpose might bring to mind the idea of Sabbath. Unfortunately, the concept of Sabbath isn't popular in today's world in which the production-consumption-production-consumption cycle is king and the value of a person is often determined by what they can produce and by the perceived value of the role they play in a market economy.

The same value was placed on ancient Israelites when they were enslaved by the Egyptians. Indeed, while the idea of Sabbath was birthed in the story of the Creation as it appears in the Book of Genesis when God rests on the seventh day, it is not until the Book of Exodus, when Moses receives the Ten Commandments, that the idea of Sabbath is fleshed out for human beings.

Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. ⁹ Six days you shall labor and do all your work, ¹⁰ but the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns. ¹¹ For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy. Exodus 20:8-11

In order for us to begin to capture the essence of that meaning, the integral role Sabbath plays in the life of Christians and Jews, a quick review of the Book of Exodus, as adapted from the online teaching website *Schmoop*, would likely be helpful.

In the beginning of the Book of Exodus, the Israelites are . . . residing in Egypt and multiplying. But then a new Pharaoh comes to power, and he starts enslaving the Israelites. When he gets worried about how many Israelites there are, he orders that all Egyptians must help to kill all male Israelite babies to control the population . . .

One baby boy, Moses, survives because his mother puts him in the Nile and he's picked up by Pharaoh's daughter. Moses grows up as an Egyptian prince, but then kills an Egyptian overseer when he sees the man beating an Israelite, one of Moses's kin.

Moses heads out of town because of what he did, and finds himself in the wilderness. Eventually, Moses has an encounter with God, who appears to him out of a bush that's engulfed in flames, but does not burn. God's message to Moses in that burning bush? Moses and his brother Aaron must go to Egypt to free the Israelites.

Moses and Aaron ask Pharaoh really nicely if he'll set the slaves free, but [Pharaoh says no.] God then decides to display God's wrath, raining ten plagues down on Egypt: bloodied water, lice, flies, livestock diseases, boils, skyfire, locusts, and impenetrable darkness. Then, to top it off, God finally slays each Egyptian firstborn. Pharaoh lets the Israelites go, but then changes his mind.

The Egyptians pursue the fleeing Israelites to the Red Sea. God and Moses split the sea apart, allowing the Israelites to cross the water. Pharaoh's troops enter after them, but God closes the sea, and the Egyptians drown.

Now the Israelites are in the desert. God helps them solve basic food and water problems [by dropping manna from the sky and having water erupt from rocks] and they set about coming up with rules for the new nation. God gives Moses the Ten Commandments. [These Ten Commandments become the basis of what and how the Israelite people will be. They are the covenant, the promise, between God and God's

*people. They are a game changer, a new rule book, the defining characteristics of what it means for the Jews to be God's chosen people.]*¹

The story of the Exodus is a story about the Israelite people reorienting themselves to a new reality in which God is their ruler—not Pharaoh. The tabernacle where God resides on earth is holy, not the pyramids or a palace. When God is your God, your primary sense of worth comes from the fact that you are a child a God. When Pharaoh tries to be your God, the empire reduces your worth to what you are able to produce for the sake of the empire. God seeks relationship with God's people, Pharaoh seeks wealth from his people and is willing to gain it based on the oppression and work of the least among us. A hallmark of the covenant created between God and the Israelites during their time in the Wilderness is Sabbath—the chance to do nothing. Under Pharaoh, doing nothing brought death. Under God, doing nothing brings life.

Under Pharaoh, the people were units of production. Under God, the people are productive and industrious—but that is not the end all, be all of who and what they are. They are also people of God and God gives them the gift of Sabbath—the gift of rest—the gift of doing nothing for a whole day every week. It's a radical and revolutionary idea. It takes an entire book of the Bible to tell the story about that forty years in the lives of the Israelites, the amount of time it took for the people to get reoriented to their new identity. Sabbath, the chance to get to do nothing, is an integral part of that identity.

Sabbath continues to play an important role throughout scriptures, especially in the ministry of Jesus. As he explained to his disciples when the Pharisees questioned him about healing on the Sabbath, “The Sabbath was made for people, not people for the Sabbath.” Sabbath is intended to help us, not burden us. It is an opportunity, not an obligation. It is our weekly chance to do nothing.

But, when we are doing nothing, we are sometimes doing something—we are leaning into our identity as beloved children of God for whom it is going to be okay if we just stop and rest for a while. As one commentator writes “Contemporary practice of Sabbath is not concerned to devise a system of restrictions and ‘blue laws.’ Rather, Sabbath concerns the periodic, disciplined, regular disengagement from the systems of productivity whereby the world uses people up to exhaustion. That disengagement refers also to culture-produced expectations for frantic leisure, frantic consumption, or frantic exercise. . . . Sabbath is the daring recognition that with the change of sovereigns wrought in the Exodus—from Pharaoh to God—such unrewarding expenditure of labor is no longer required.”² Doing nothing on the Sabbath gives us the chance to remember and contemplate what we really are—children of God.

And, as children of God, any talk about the Sabbath and doing nothing is also an opportunity for us to consider the welfare of those who cannot afford a Sabbath, those who though sometimes even employed full-time, aren't paid a living wage that allows them the luxury of taking some time every now and again to do nothing. There are still those upon whose backs the empire is being built and that is sin.

Because, God knows, people need a day to do nothing. Indeed, a day a week to do nothing is an important part of what makes us people of God in the first place.

C. Robin: Pooh?

Pooh (Les): Hmm, Christopher Robin?

C. Robin: What do you like doing best in the world?

Pooh (Les): What I like best is me going to visit you and you saying, “How about a smackeral of honey?”

C. Robin: I like that, too. But what I like best is just doing nothing.

Pooh (Les): How do you do just nothing?

C. Robin: Well, it's when grown-ups ask “What are you going to do?” And you say, “Nothing.” And then you go out and do it.

Pooh: I like that. Let's do it all the time.

¹ <https://www.shmoop.com/exodus/summary.html>

² New Interpreter's Bible, Volume 1, Pg. 846