

A blurred, high-angle photograph of a busy airport terminal. In the foreground, a round analog clock is mounted on a metal structure, showing the time as approximately 10:10. The background is filled with the motion-blurred figures of people walking through the terminal, creating a sense of constant activity and time pressure. The lighting is a mix of cool blues and warm yellows from the terminal's lights.

NEW EDITION with STUDY GUIDE

sabbath as resistance

Saying NO to the CULTURE OF NOW

WALTER BRUEGGEMANN

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WALTER BRUEGGEMANN

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PREFACE

FOR THE MOST PART, CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIANS PAY LITTLE attention to the Sabbath. We more or less know that the day came to reflect, in U.S. culture, the most stringent disciplinary faith of the Puritans which, in recent time, translated into a moralistic prescription for a day of quiet restraint and prohibition. In many, somewhat-pietistic homes that amounted to not playing cards or seeing films on Sunday, and certainly not shopping. I can remember each year debates in our rural community about farmers working on some few Sundays to harvest wheat in the face of devastating rains that were sure to come. I can remember from my earlier days, moreover, that because of “Blue Laws,” Sunday home baseball games for the Phillies and the Pirates in Pennsylvania could not begin a new inning after 6:00

p.m. The sum of all these memories of restraint was essentially negative, a series of “Thou Shalt Nots” that served to echo the more fundamental prohibitions of the Decalogue. This context did not offer much potential for seeing the Sabbath in a positive way as an affirmative declaration of faith or identity. And, of course, as church monopoly in our culture has in many places waned or disappeared, the commitment to Sabbath discipline has likewise receded.

As in so many things concerning Christian faith and practice, we have to be reeducated by Judaism that has been able to sustain its commitment to Sabbath as a positive practice of faith.¹ The magisterial book of Abraham Heschel continues to be a lead voice in a Jewish awareness of Sabbath.² In our present context, perhaps it is Michael Fishbane’s eloquent probe of Jewish practices that has the most to teach us about Jewish understandings of Sabbath.³ Fishbane’s discussion is in the larger context of his splendid book concerning the maintenance of Jewish “mindfulness” in a society that is increasingly “mindless.” The Sabbath, along with the other practices he exposit, concerns the maintenance of a distinct faith identity in the midst of a culture that is inhospitable to all distinct identities in its impatient reduction of all human life to the requirements of the market. In contrast (and contradiction) to cultural mindlessness (that can hardly be underestimated!):

The Sabbath and its observance may cultivate a theological mindfulness. . . .

How so?

The Sabbath sanctifies time through sanctioned forms of rest and inaction. On this day certain work-

aday activities and ordinary busyness are suspended and brought to a halt. In their stead, a whole host of ways of resting the body and mind are cultivated. These are of a special cultural type. For though we have a natural notion of work, and think of it in terms of physical exertion or compulsory performance done in order to sustain one's livelihood, these kinds of labor relate to our Adamic selves: the physical self that is sent forth into the world and must work the earth to provide sustenance, while losing body strength on one's life-course toward death. By contrast, our Mosaic selves are enhanced through the teachings of the Oral Torah, which bring other notions of work and categories of labor to bear.⁴

Fishbane contrasts the "Adamic self," the one of natural creatureliness, with the "Mosaic self" that comes under the sway of the Mosaic commands of Sinai. The Sabbath is a sphere of inaction.

One enters the sphere of inaction through divestment, and this release affects all the elements of the workaday sphere. Business activity and exchange of money are forbidden, and one is urged not just to desist from commerce but to develop more interior spheres of settling the mind from this type of agitation. . . . Slowly, under these multiple conditions, a sense of inaction takes over, and the day does not merely mark the stoppage of work or celebrate the completion of creation, but enforces the value that the earth is a gift of divine creativity, given to humankind in sacred trust. On the Sabbath, the practical benefits of technology are laid aside, and one tries to stand in the cycle of natural time, without manipulation or interference. To the degree possible, one must attempt to bring the qualities of inaction and rest into the heart and mind. . . . The Sabbath is thus a period of sacred stasis, a

duration of sanctity through the cultivation of inaction in body and spirit. . . .

The heartbeat of repose may thus suffuse the mind and limbs of one's being, and generate an inner balance poised on quietude and a settled spirit.⁵

The choice of an economic image by Fishbane, "divestment," suggests that we may consider the sabbath as an alternative to the endless demands of economic reality, more specifically the demands of market ideology that depend, as Adam Smith had already seen, on the generation of needs and desires that will leave us endlessly "rest-less," inadequate, unfulfilled, and in pursuit of that which may satiate desire. Those requirements concern endless predation so that we are a society of 24/7 multitasking in order to achieve, accomplish, perform, and possess. But the demands of market ideology pertain as much to consumption as they do to production. Thus the system of commodity requires that we want more, have more, own more, use more, eat more, and drink more. The rat race of such predation and usurpation is a restlessness that issues inescapably in anxiety that is often at the edge of being unmanageable; when pursued vigorously enough, moreover, one is propelled to violence against the neighbor in eagerness for what properly belongs to the neighbor.

As acute as this is for us in our society, this is not an unprecedented or even new situation. It is, as Judaism remembers, as old as Pharaoh's insatiable script for production. It is impossible to imagine that in the system of Pharaoh there could ever be any restfulness for anyone (see Exod. 5:4–19). Most remarkably Israel, in the narrative, finally is delivered from Pharaoh's

anxiety system and comes to the wilderness; there Israel is given bread that it is not permitted to store up (Exod. 16:13–21). But even more remarkable, even in such a marginal context, with daily need for bread that is given for the day, provision is made for the Sabbath. Israel cannot store up bread for more than a day; except (big “except”!) on the sixth day Israel may store up enough for the seventh day so that it can rest on that day (vv. 22–24). This unexpected provision is surely a sign that this bread for life is not under the demanding governance of Pharaoh; it is under the sustaining rule of the creator God. Even in the wilderness with scarce resources, God mandates a pause for Sabbath for the community:

Eat it today, for today is a sabbath to the LORD; today you will not find it in the field. Six days you shall gather it, but on the seventh day, which is a sabbath, there will be none.

On the seventh day some of the people went out to gather, and they found none. The LORD said to Moses, “How long will you refuse to keep my commandments and instructions? See! The LORD has given you the sabbath, therefore on the sixth day he gives you food for two days; each of you stay where you are; do not leave your place on the seventh day.” So the people rested on the seventh day (vv. 25–30).

The conclusion affirmed by the narrative is that wherever YHWH governs as an alternative to Pharaoh, there the restfulness of YHWH effectively counters the restless anxiety of Pharaoh.

In our own contemporary context of the rat race of anxiety, the celebration of Sabbath is an act of both resistance and alternative. It is resistance because it is

a visible insistence that our lives are not defined by the production and consumption of commodity goods. Such an act of resistance requires enormous intentionality and communal reinforcement amid the barrage of seductive pressures from the insatiable insistences of the market, with its intrusion into every part of our life from the family to the national budget. In our anxious society, to cite a case in point, one of the great “seductions of Pharaoh” is the fact that “soccer practice” invades the rest day. Families, largely contained in market ideology, think of themselves as helpless before the requirements of such commitment. In context it requires (or “would require,” subjunctive, contrary to fact) enormous, communal resolve to resist the demand.

But Sabbath is not only resistance. It is alternative. It is an alternative to the demanding, chattering, pervasive presence of advertising and its great liturgical claim of professional sports that devour all our “rest time.” The alternative on offer is the awareness and practice of the claim that we are situated on the receiving end of the gifts of God. To be so situated is a staggering option, because we are accustomed to being on the initiating end of all things. We neither expect nor even want a gift to be given, so inured are we to accomplishing and achieving and possessing. Thus I have come to think that the fourth commandment on sabbath is the most difficult and most urgent of the commandments in our society, because it summons us to intent and conduct that defies the most elemental requirements of a commodity-propelled society that specializes in control and entertainment, bread and circuses . . . along with anxiety and violence.

I have taken as a theme for this little book a familiar phrase from the teaching of Jesus in Mathew 11: There he contrasts the “heavy yoke” of his contemporary society with his “easy yoke” (vv. 29–30). That heavy yoke about which his listeners knew perhaps refers to the imposition of Rome and the demanding taxation of the empire, an endless tax to support military adventurism. It is equally possible that the yoke refers to the stringent requirements of establishment religion in which many could not qualify. Either way, empire or religion that colludes with empire, the requirements of acquiescent conduct were heavy. And Jesus, who resisted such a yoke, offered an alternative life of discipleship. Thus in our text, *discipleship* may concern the love of God and the love of neighbor, practices readily alternative to “making it” in the economic world of command performance.

And now, in the utterance of Jesus and in the practice of Jesus and his community, gifts are given! The gifts that are given lie outside the domain of empire and its colluding symbol systems. By appealing to Jesus, I do not suggest Christian preemption of this defining Jewish observance. Rather Jesus fully understood and commended the practice of his Jewish inheritance, which invites to restfulness.

This book is addressed exactly to those who are “weary and heavy laden,” made so by the insatiable requirements of our society—in its taxation for the sake of imperialism, in its social conformity that urges doing more and having more (now perniciously embodied in “teaching to test”), in its frightened intent that there should be no “free lunch” for anyone, in its assumption

that there is a technological resolution of every human problem, in its pathologies of greed and control.

I am glad to thank David Maxwell, who first invited me to write on Sabbath for his enterprise *The Thoughtful Christian*. I am equally grateful to Marianne Blickenstaff for her readiness to move from that initial publication with David to what is offered here. And I am pleased that the press has now added a study guide. I anticipate that such a study guide will give many readers better access to the issues to be faced concerning Sabbath. I am most grateful for the work of Martha Bettis Gee who has prepared the study guide. She has engaged the material in a most thoughtful way that will be of great benefit to readers of the study as they pursue these urgent issues.

I have found this study to be an important existential one for me. I know about the restless anxiety of not yet having done enough. I am glad to dedicate this book to the memory of my mother, Hilda, who knew more about work than about rest. Charles was her firstborn who died young, in his second year, before I was born. I learned more about a work ethic from my mother than I did about rest. But my growing up was plain and simple, close to the soil. There was in our home a natural restfulness imposed by the measures of rural life and my father's blessed garden. My mother would readily interrupt her Sabbath rest for the sake of any of her sons, most especially for Charles, whose precarious life required such attentiveness that she willingly gave.

I have come to think that the moment of giving the bread of Eucharist as gift is the quintessential center

of the notion of Sabbath rest in Christian tradition. It is gift! We receive in gratitude. Imagine having a sacrament named “thanks”! We are on the receiving end, without accomplishment, achievement, or qualification. It is a gift, and we are grateful! That moment of gift is a peaceable alternative that many who are “weary and heavy-laden, cumbered with a load of care” receive gladly. The offer of free gift, faithful to Judaism, might let us learn enough to halt the dramatic anti-neighborliness to which our society is madly and uncritically committed. Fishbane concludes concerning the “Lord of Peace”:

This is dying within life for love of God. It is a divestment of will for God’s sake—and the wonder of the world.⁶

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NOTES

1. There are, of course, many fine studies of the Sabbath by Christian interpreters. Among the best is Marva J. Dawn, *Keeping the Sabbath Wholly: Ceasing, Resting, Embracing, Fasting* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989).

2. Abraham Heschel, *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1951).

3. Michael Fishbane, *Sacred Attunement: A Jewish Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

4. *Ibid.*, 124–25.

5. *Ibid.*, 125–27.

6. *Ibid.*, 128.

Chapter 1

SABBATH AND THE FIRST COMMANDMENT

INTERPRETATION SERIES EDITOR PATRICK MILLER HAS shrewdly observed that the fourth commandment on Sabbath is the “crucial bridge” that connects the Ten Commandments together.¹ The fourth commandment looks back to the first three commandments and the God who rests (Exod. 20:3–7). At the same time, the Sabbath commandment looks forward to the last six commandments that concern the neighbor (vv. 12–17); they provide for rest alongside the neighbor. God, self, and all members of the household share in common rest on the seventh day; that social reality provides a commonality and a coherence not only to the community of covenant but to the commandments of Sinai as well. For that reason, it is appropriate in our study of the Sabbath commandment to begin with a reflection

on the first commandment and, subsequently, to finish our work with a consideration of the tenth commandment that concludes the Decalogue.

The first commandments concern God, God's aniconic character, and God's name (Exod. 20:3–7). But when we consider the identity of this God, we are made immediately aware that the God who will brook no rival and who eventually will rest is a God who is embedded in a narrative; this God is not known or available apart from that narrative. The narrative matrix of YHWH, the God of Israel, is the exodus narrative. This is the God “who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery” (v. 2). Thus the Sabbath commandment is drawn into the exodus narrative, for the God who rests is the God who emancipates *from slavery* and consequently *from the work system of Egypt* and *from the gods of Egypt* who require and legitimate that work system. It is, for that reason, fair to judge that the prohibition against “the other gods” in the first commandment pertains directly to the gods of Egypt (see Exod. 12:12) and other gods of the same ilk in Canaan, or subsequently the gods of the great empires of Assyria, Babylon, or Persia. In the narrative imagination of Israel, the gods of Egypt are stand-ins for all the gods of the several empires. What they all have in common is that they are confiscatory gods who demand endless produce and who authorize endless systems of production that are, in principle, insatiable. Thus, the mention of “Egypt” brings the God of Israel into the orbit of socioeconomic systems and practices, and inevitably sets this God on a collision course with the gods of insatiable productivity.

The reference to “Egypt” indicates that the God of Sinai who gives the Ten Commandments is never simply a “religious figure” but is always preoccupied with and attentive to socioeconomic practice and policy. If we want, then, to understand this God (or any god), we must look to the socioeconomic system that god legitimates and authorizes. In the case of the Egyptian gods (who are in contrast to and in competition with the God of the exodus), we look to Pharaoh’s system of production that is legitimated by the gods worshiped by Pharaoh. In Exodus 5, we are given a passionate narrative account of that labor system in which Pharaoh endlessly demands more production. What the slaves are to produce is more bricks that are to be used for the building of more “supply cities” in which Pharaoh can store his endless supply of material wealth in the form of grain (see Exod. 1:11). Because the system was designed to produce more and more surplus (see Gen. 47:13–26), there is always more need for storage units that in turn generated more need for bricks with which to construct them. Thus, if we follow the required bricks from the slave camps, we end with surplus wealth, taken as a gift of the gods of Pharaoh.

In this narrative report, Pharaoh is a hard-nosed production manager for whom production schedules are inexhaustible:

- “[W]hy are you taking the people away from their work? Get to your labors!” (Exod. 5:4)
- “. . . yet you want them to stop working!” (v. 5)
- “You shall no longer give the people straw to

make bricks as before; let them go and gather straw for themselves. But you shall require of them the same quantity of bricks as they have made previously; do not diminish it, for they are lazy.” (vv. 7–8)

- “Let heavier work be laid on them; then they will labor at it and pay no attention to deceptive words.” (v. 9)
- “I will not give you straw. Go and get straw yourselves, wherever you can find it; but your work will not be lessened in the least.” (vv. 10–11)
- “Complete your work the same daily assignment as when you were given straw.” (v. 13)
- “Why did you not finish the required quantity of bricks yesterday and today, as you did before?” (v. 14)
- “No straw is given to your servants, yet they say to us, ‘Make bricks.’” (v. 16)
- “You are lazy, lazy; that is why you say, ‘Let us go and sacrifice to the Lord.’ Go now, and work; for no straw will be given you but you shall still deliver the same number of bricks.” (vv. 17–19)
- “You shall not lessen your daily number of bricks.” (v. 19)

The rhetoric is relentless, all to the single point, as relentless as is the production schedule.

It is clear that in this system there can be no Sabbath rest. There is no rest for Pharaoh in his supervisory capacity, and he undoubtedly monitors daily production schedules. Consequently, there can be no

rest for Pharaoh's supervisors or taskmasters; and of course there can be no rest for the slaves who must satisfy the taskmasters in order to meet Pharaoh's demanding quotas. We may imagine, moreover, that the "Egyptian gods" also never rested, because of their commitment to the aggrandizement of Pharaoh's system, for the glory of Pharaoh surely redounded to the glory of the Egyptian gods. The economy reflects the splendor of the gods who legitimate the entire system, for which cheap labor is an indispensable footnote!

It requires no imagination to see that the exodus memory and consequently the Sinai commandments are performed in a "no Sabbath" environment. In that context, all levels of social power—gods, Pharaoh, supervisors, taskmasters, slaves—are uniformly caught up in and committed to the grind of endless production.

Into this system of hopeless weariness erupts the God of the burning bush (Exod. 3:1–6). That God heard the despairing fatigue of the slaves (2:23–25), resolved to liberate the slave company of Israel from that exploitative system (3:7–9), and recruited Moses for the human task of emancipation (3:10). The reason Miriam and the other women can sing and dance at the end of the exodus narrative is the emergence of a new social reality in which the life of the Israelite economy is no longer determined and compelled by the insatiable production quotas of Egypt and its gods (15:20–21).

The first commandment is a declaration that the God of the exodus is *unlike* all the gods the slaves have known heretofore. This God is not to be confused with

or thought parallel to the insatiable gods of imperial productivity. This God is subsequently revealed as a God of mercy, steadfast love, and faithfulness who is committed to covenantal relationships of fidelity (see Exod. 34:6–7). At the taproot of this divine commitment to *relationship (covenant)* rather than *commodity (bricks)* is the capacity and willingness of this God to rest. The Sabbath rest of God is the acknowledgment that God and God’s people in the world are not commodities to be dispatched for endless production and so dispatched, as we used to say, as “hands” in the service of a command economy. Rather they are subjects situated in an economy of neighborliness. All of that is implicit in the reality and exhibit of divine rest.

Thus the Sabbath command of Exodus 20:11 recalls that God rested on the seventh day of creation, an allusion to Genesis 2:1–4. That divine rest on the seventh day of creation has made clear (a) that YHWH is not a workaholic, (b) that YHWH is not anxious about the full functioning of creation, and (c) that the well-being of creation does not depend on endless work. This performance and exhibit of divine rest thus characterize the God of creation, creation itself, and the creatures made in the image of the resting God. Creation is to be enacted and embraced without defining anxiety. Indeed, such divine rest serves to delegitimize and dismantle the endless restlessness sanctioned by the other gods and enacted by their adherents. That divine rest on the seventh day, moreover, is recalled in the commandment of Exodus 31:12–17, wherein God is “refreshed” on the seventh day. The God of Israel (and of creation) is no immovable, fixed object, but here is said to be

depleted and by rest may recover a full sense of “self” (*nephesh*).

The second commandment is closely related to the first. The commandment against “graven images” (idols) is a prohibition against any artistic representation of YHWH, for such representation would serve to “locate” YHWH, to domesticate God and so to curb the freedom that belongs to this erupting God (Exod. 20:4–6; see 2 Sam. 7:6–7). Such images have the effect of drawing God, in imagination and in practice, away from covenantal, relational fidelity and back into a world of objects and commodities. The temptation to produce an “image” of God in artistic form is always, everywhere a chance to produce a commodity out of valuable material, at best gold if it is available, or lesser valuable material if there is no gold. When a god is fashioned into a golden commodity (or even lesser material), divine subject becomes divine object, and agent becomes commodity. We may cite two obvious examples of this temptation in the Old Testament. First, in the narrative of the “Golden Calf” in Exodus 32, it was gold that was fashioned into the image that readily became an alternative god who jeopardized the covenant. The ensuing narrative of Exodus 33–34 tells of the hard and tricky negotiations whereby covenantal possibility is restored to Israel after its foray into distorting images (Exod. 34:9–10). Less dramatically, it is evident that Solomon’s temple, designed to “house” YHWH, became a commodity enterprise preoccupied with gold (emphasis added):

The interior of the inner sanctuary was twenty cubits long, twenty cubits wide, and twenty cubits high; he overlaid it with pure *gold*. He also overlaid the altar

with cedar. Solomon overlaid the inside of the house with pure *gold*, then he drew chains of *gold* across in front of the inner sanctuary, and overlaid it with *gold*. Next he overlaid the whole house with *gold*, in order that the whole house might be perfect; even the whole altar that belonged to the inner sanctuary he overlaid with *gold*. (1 Kgs. 6:20–22)

So Solomon made all the vessels that were in the house of the LORD: the *golden* altar, the *golden* table for the bread of the Presence, the lampstands of pure *gold*, five on the south side and five on the north, in front of the inner sanctuary; the flowers, the lamps, and the tongs of *gold*, the cups, snuffers, basins, dishes for incense, and fire pans of pure *gold*; the sockets for the doors of the innermost part of the house, the most holy place, and for the doors of the nave of the temple of *gold*. (7:48–50)

Even as YHWH was honored by such extravagance, the temple was clearly intended to reflect honor on Solomon and on his regime. The attention to gold objects clearly skewed the simple and direct matter of covenantal possibility. Commodity desire has, for the most part, crowded out the covenantal tradition.

In the modern world, Karl Marx reflected most deeply on the compelling power of commodity. He took his famous phrase “commodity fetishism” from current study of the history of religions in which it was judged that “primitives” had such fetishes that occupied their desire and their devotion. Marx transferred that idea from “primitive” practice to modern market fascination and came to see that possessing commodities of social value generated a desire for more such value so that commodity took on a power of its own

that consisted of desire for more and more. It is easy enough to see Pharaoh's compulsion for more grain (a measure of wealth) beyond anything he could have needed, simply so that he could exhibit his great wealth and power. His desire for more created a restlessness that could permit no Sabbath rest for himself or any in his domain. And clearly Solomon is sketched out as the one who would possess all of his available world in his insatiable need for more (see 1 Kgs. 10:14–25).

For good reason the book of Deuteronomy ponders the force and danger of “images of God.” In what is likely a late exposition of the first two commandments, this sermonistic chapter looks back to the danger done by “commodity religion”:

Since you saw no form when the LORD spoke to you at Horeb out of the fire, take care and watch yourselves closely, so that you do not act corruptly by making an idol for yourselves, in the form of any figure—the likeness of male or female, the likeness of any animal that is on the earth, the likeness of any winged bird that flies in the air, the likeness of anything that creeps on the ground, the likeness of any fish that is in the water under the earth. And when you look up to the heavens and see the sun, the moon, and the stars, all the host of heaven, do not be led astray and bow down to them and serve them, things that the LORD your God has allotted to all the peoples everywhere under heaven. (Deut. 4:15–19)

The danger is to compromise the peculiarity of YHWH and of Israel.

After this inventory of possible images, the rhetoric of verse 20 voices the alternative:

But the LORD has taken you and brought you out of the iron-smelter, out of Egypt, to become a people of his very own possession, as you are now.

The emancipatory gift of YHWH to Israel is contrasted with all the seductions of images. The memory of the exodus concerns the God of freedom who frees. The clear implication is that fixed images preclude freedom and become icons of stable equilibrium. Such image-religion becomes a way of sustaining status quo socioeconomic power that negates the emancipatory impulse of Israel's God and Israel's defining narrative. Thus it is credible to see that the culmination of *creation* in Sabbath and the culmination of *exodus* in Sabbath together refuse Pharaoh's pursuit of commodity. This refusal is decisive for Israel's faith and Israel's management of the economy: Do not worship such objects or make them your defining desire! That radical either/or is precisely the issue of the first commandment. It concerns the two temptations Israel faced, a temptation toward idols and an economic temptation of Israel to commodity.

YHWH is a Sabbath-keeping God, which fact ensures that restfulness and not restlessness is at the center of life. YHWH is a Sabbath-giving God and a Sabbath-commanding God. Israel, for that reason, is always again to re-choose between "life and death" (Deut. 30:15–20), between YHWH and "the gods of your ancestors" (Josh. 24:14–15), between YHWH and Baal (1 Kgs. 18:21), between the way of Torah and the way of sinners (Ps. 1). Sabbath becomes a decisive, concrete, visible way of opting for and aligning with the God of rest.

That same either/or is evident, of course, in the teaching of Jesus. In his Sermon on the Mount, he declares to his disciples:

No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth. (Matt. 6:24)

The way of *mammon* (capital, wealth) is the way of commodity, which is the way of endless desire, endless productivity, and endless restlessness without any Sabbath. Jesus taught his disciples that they could not have it both ways.

In the tradition of Matthew, the next verses (vv. 25–33) expost the power of anxiety as the alternative to trust. It is, of course, in the same gospel tradition that Jesus comes to these familiar words:

Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light. (11:28–30)

“Weariness, being heavy-laden, yoke” are all ways of speaking of the commodity society of endless productivity. In context, this might have referred to the strenuous taxation system of the Roman Empire, for “yoke” often refers to imperial imposition. Alternatively, this may have referred to the endless requirements of an over-coded religious system that required endless attentiveness. With reference to imperial imposition or over-coded religion, Jesus offers an alternative:

come to me and rest! He becomes the embodiment of Sabbath rest for those who are no longer defined by and committed to the system of productiveness. In this role he is, as he is characteristically, fully in sync with the tradition of Israel and with the Sabbath God who occupies that tradition.

Because Jews and Christians continue to attend to these commandments as contemporary mandates, we may consider the ways in which the first commandment (concerning the emancipatory God and no other) and the second commandment (concerning images as commodities) pertain to our common life. It is, of course, the case that the commandments always pertain to the constancy of the human condition and to gospel possibility. But we may more particularly consider the peculiar and immediate way in which the first two commandments pertain to our present circumstance. The “choice of gods” is, in context, a choice of restlessness or restfulness.

The reality of restlessness in our contemporary society is obvious and epidemic. The identification of that restlessness perhaps goes back to the categories of Martin Luther concerning “faith and works,” with the accent on “works” indicating a need to produce, perform, and qualify for the goodness of God. It is an easy move to take that Reformation accent on “works” and see in our current social restlessness evidence of not yet being good enough or having done enough. Or perhaps such restlessness is rooted in the Enlightenment discovery of the individual and the emergent ideology of individualism that cuts us off from the buoyant sustenance of community and tradi-

tion. In that ideology, one is not only free to secure one's own future without answering to any other; one is also required to secure one's own future, because a laissez-faire economics mandates that one must sink or swim by one's own effort, and it is never enough simply to tread water.

These rootages in Reformation and Enlightenment categories have created a contemporary circumstance in our society that generates an endless pursuit of greater security and greater happiness, a pursuit that is always unsatisfied, because we have never gotten or done enough . . . yet. The gods ("other gods") of this system are the gods of market ideology that summon to endless desires and needs that are never met but that always require yet greater effort.

The various elements of that restlessness of "not enough yet" and "greater effort required" are evident everywhere. But they are grounded in a theological desire for an ultimate reality of total satiation that is no reality at all. That theological "mis-commitment" is apparent in economic performance that can never fully satisfy. Such an intrinsic and systemic inadequacy is a recognizable echo of the ancient Hebrew slaves, harassed by many supervisors and taskmasters who kept reminding them of the inadequacy of their production.

– *The advertising game*, the liturgy of consumerism in the service of market theology, always offers one more product for purchase, one more car, one more deodorant, one more prescription drug, one more cell phone, one more beer. The message is that the "product" will make one safe or simply acceptable. But the

preliminary message is that one is not yet safe or not yet acceptable because one does not yet have the product. The production of “new and improved,” the endless advance of style, and the always-new technology make old possessions inadequate and incomplete so that there is and must be an open-ended effort to satisfy the gods of commodity.

– In order to have economic leverage to pursue such commodity, *an educational advantage* is all but indispensable. As a result, there is a striving for improvement reflected in “teaching to the test” so that we may demonstrate not only competence but also superiority. Such a commoditization of education means that the study of tradition in artful, critical fashion is lost in the urge of test scores. In order that one may test well, moreover, there is an incessant pressure for admission to the right school and thus tutorial pressure to enhance performance.

– But because test scores are not sufficient for admission to the “best” educational programs, there must be *supplementary extracurricular activity*. This in turn requires constantly attentive parents who perform as chauffeurs to get to the next tennis or soccer or piano lesson so that a prospect for fun or nurture disappears into restlessness that becomes a process of accumulation of qualifying marks.

– And if young persons are cast as performers of social restlessness, the economy is a process of getting ahead or of staying even by the same route of accumulation. As a result, the restlessness becomes *a political effort* to own and control congress and court appointments in order that laws may be enacted concerning credit and tax arrangements and regulatory agencies to make way for predation

by the strong and well-connected in their desire for more. That restlessness inevitably has resulted in many “left behind” who cannot compete due to poor circumstance or opportunity or a defeatism that properly assesses one’s hopeless chances in a rapacious system. The outcome of such endless striving for more is a social arrangement of the safety and happiness of the few at the expense of the many, a replica of the “pyramid” of ancient Pharaoh.

– Such economic advantage and the unsustainable standard of living that it permits require *an expansive and aggressive military* in order to control resources and markets so that the world economy, reflected in the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, is designed to keep the gains flowing to the top of the pyramid of power and success. It is not accidental that the best graphic portrayal of this arrangement is a pyramid, the supreme construction of Pharaoh’s system. Those at the top of the pyramid require huge amounts of cheap labor at a parsimonious “minimum wage” to make such a life possible.

– This limitless pursuit of consumer goods (and the political, cultural, and military requirements that go with it) in the interest of satiation necessitates over-production and *abuse of the land*, and the squandering of limited supplies of oil and water. Thus, the environment is savaged by such restlessness; the ordering creation is skewed, perhaps beyond viability. It is long since forgotten that rest is the final marking of creator and creation.

– The totem for such restlessness is perhaps *professional sports* (with major college sports only a subset of professional sports). The endless carnival of those sports constitutes a dramatic affirmation of power, wealth,

and virility in which “victory” is accomplished by many abusive exploitations, all in pursuit of winning and being on top of the heap of the money game.

– And of course, every facet of this restlessness is grounded in and produces anxiety that variously issues in aggression and finally manifests in *violence*:

- violence expressed in military adventurism that enjoys huge “patriotic” support;
- violence against the earth that is signaled by overuse;
- violence in sports, now with evidence of “paid injuries”;
- violence in the neighborhood, with guns now the icon of “violent security”;
- violence against every vulnerable population, sexual aggression against the young and the “war on the poor,” which is accomplished by law and by banking procedures.

It is impossible, is it not, to overestimate the level of anxiety that now characterizes social relationships in our society of acute restlessness? That violent restlessness makes neighborliness nearly impossible.

None of this is new; all of it is much chronicled among us. All of it is as old as Pharaoh’s Egypt. The narrative of the exodus is not a “one off” miracle. The portrayal of the slave camps of Egypt and the deliverance of the exodus do not constitute an isolated miracle. The narrative is a rendering of recurring social relationships legitimated by anti-neighborly gods who give warrant, in the interest of commodity, to redefine neighbors as slaves, threats, rivals, and competitors.

Only when we ponder the “other gods” and the systems they authorize can we appreciate the radical nature of these first two commandments. Into this arena of restlessness comes the God of rest who offers relief from that anxiety-producing system. This God has no hunger for commodities and does not legitimate commodity systems. This God is attentive rather to the cries of those “left behind” and comes to open futures by exit (exodus) from systems of restlessness into the restfulness of neighborliness.

The two commandments go beneath social performance and social appearance to the deep, elemental, defining issue of “God versus the gods.” These gods of commoditization for the most part go unchallenged in our world. As a result, their exploitative systems go unchallenged and unnoticed. The abuse becomes normal. Restlessness is unexceptional. Anxiety is a given, and violence is unexamined as “the cost of doing business.” It is all a virtual reality in which we become narcotized into a system that seems to be a given rather than a construction.

In that context, we have the exodus narrative that shows those gods of commodity to be powerless and without authority. They are phonies that we should neither fear nor serve nor trust:

They have mouths, but do not speak;
 eyes, but do not see.
They have ears, but do not hear;
 noses, but do not smell.
They have hands, but do not feel;
 feet, but do not walk;
they make no sound in their throat. (Ps. 115:5–7)

More than that:

Those who make them are like them;
so are all who trust in them. (v. 8)

They are the ones who champion anxiety and affirm restlessness. The adherents to the gods of restlessness find such a predatory society normal.

And then into our midst comes this other unexpected voice from outside the Pharonic system: “Let my people go!” (Exod. 5:1). It is not surprising that Pharaoh does not recognize the commanding voice of YHWH. Pharaoh’s system precludes and denies any such commanding voice that emancipates (v. 2). But YHWH persists: Let them go outside the system of restlessness that ends in violence. Let them depart the system of endless production, in order to enter a world of covenantal fidelity. In ancient context, they must depart from the Egyptian system in order to dance and sing freedom.

The departure from that same system in our time is not geographical. It is rather emotional, liturgical, and economic. It is not an idea but a practical act. Thus the Sabbath of the fourth commandment is an act of trust in the subversive, exodus-causing God of the first commandment, an act of submission to the restful God of commandments one, two, and three. Sabbath is a practical divestment so that neighborly engagement, rather than production and consumption, defines our lives. It is for good reason that Sabbath has long been, for theologically serious Jews, the defining discipline. It is also for good rea-

son that Enlightenment-based autonomous Christians may find the Sabbath commandment the most urgent and the most difficult of all the commandments of Sinai. We are, liberals and conservatives, much inured to Pharaoh's system. For that reason, the departure into restfulness is both urgent and difficult, for our motors are set to run at brick-making speed. To cease, even for a time, the anxious striving for more bricks is to find ourselves with a "light burden" and an "easy yoke." It is now, as then, enough to permit dancing and singing into an alternative life.

NOTES

1. Patrick D. Miller, *The Ten Commandments*, Interpretation (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 117.