

“Why Slow Down Now?”
June 26, 2022

Exodus 20:8-11
Luke 8:40-56

A few comments before the sermon this morning—some are simply “housekeeping,” if you will.

As a program note—I will be preaching next Sunday, July 3, and working through the following week. I will then take some vacation time, beginning with the weekend of July 10 through Sunday, July 24. Bob Molsberry, Ann Molsberry and a third person yet to be named will be preaching while I take it easy.

Let me add that there has been some concern expressed about my continued wearing a mask while preaching. As with most things in a congregation—and *this* congregation—there are a variety of opinions. Some say take it off, some say leave it on. There are valid reasons for both opinions. I’m moving toward taking the mask off—favoring clarity over any perceived personal or congregational safety. And my intention is to resolve this upon my return in late July.

Finally, and most importantly: you know that I have often rewritten sermons at the last minute following significant events in our nation or the world—often a mass shooting or racist violence. Friday’s disastrous Supreme Court decision taking away the right to abortion is an event that calls for a response from the pulpit. I apologize for not addressing it directly this morning as I had neither the intellectual nor the emotional energy to do so in such a short time. I plan to address this next Sunday—indeed I’ve already started working on this—and I appreciate your understanding.

This morning I want to explore another issue that I will return to in the coming months in various ways: the speed at which we live, the busy pace of our lives. I’m beginning to understand the problem of the speed of life in some new ways—so this is just a preliminary take.

Let’s be honest, we might complain, but we wear that speed and our busyness as a badge of honor. Andrew Root, who teaches at Luther Seminary up in St. Paul, says that “Busyness makes strong claims about what is good. It is good to go fast, to do a lot, to not miss out, to know things and experience them, and to be the kind of [person] who is full with commitments, interests, and opportunities...And the fullness of busyness compels us to move ever faster.”¹

The fullness of busyness compels us to move ever faster.

High school kids and college students know about this. So do young adults and parents. And mid and late career professionals. And—show of hands—have any of you who are retired actually started to slow down?

I didn’t think so.

I’m coming to a new understanding of the effects that the speed of life is having on us and our congregation, so, again, these are just some preliminary thoughts. I do know that it is incredibly difficult to reduce the fast pace at which we live.

Some have been able to adjust and appear serene in all of this—no doubt acting on the advice of the actor Michael Caine who advised: “Be a like a duck. Remain calm on the surface and paddle like heck underneath.”

Most of us, however, just keep going faster, taking as our motto: “Death is nature’s way of telling us to slow down.”

Which reminds me of the neighbor who lived across the street from my family when I was growing up in Peoria. He was my friend’s father and was pretty much known for smoking, drinking, and swearing like a sailor—most of the words I shouldn’t have known at a tender age I learned simply from listening to him.

I’m pretty sure he was a Lutheran.

And he might have been a prophet.

We lived on a street off a main road that led to a large subdivision. So there was a lot of traffic—people coming home, people heading out to appointments or shopping. And a lot of the people drove pretty fast down that street. (Sixty years ago people were already in a hurry.) During the summer, this neighbor would sit on his porch or stand in his front yard and yell, “Slow Down!” at most of the passing cars. Soon all of the kids in the neighborhood were yelling, “Slow Down!” at anyone who dared to go beyond what we considered a reasonable speed.

He seemed so angry when he yelled at those drivers. Years later I came to understand this man in a new way. He was concerned—about his kids, about all the kids in the neighborhood. He was trying to do *something* to protect them. He was thinking when others were thoughtless. Behind his harsh façade there was compassion.

And maybe it wasn’t just the cars; maybe he sensed that life itself was going too fast.

Which is what I mean by calling my neighbor a prophet. After all, it’s been said that a prophet doesn’t *foretell* the future. A prophet *tells forth* the word of God. And sometimes the word we need to hear is Slow Down! My guess is that your life is pretty busy; that you’re running from one thing to another.

And it’s not just us personally. Andrew Root, the theologian up in St. Paul, makes the case that “democracy, the economy, our psychological well-being, and the environment are all under significant pressure, if not in crisis. And what is putting them in crisis,” he says, “is speed. Things have sped up so quickly that the slower pace of democratic discourse is becoming impossible. Markets are going so fast that inequality has become rampant. Social change and the pace of life are so accelerated that rates of burnout and depression are skyrocketing. And the heating of the planet is so relentless that the earth has no time to keep the temperature from rising.”²

Please understand—a busy life can be a joyful life. There is great pleasure to be found in acting and accomplishing and in being with others. It’s part of the created order: Each atom, each galaxy—and all of us in between—are bodies in motion.

Yet the God we encounter in the stories of Genesis is not unrelenting in activity. Even the Creator lets up after six days. And we have been created in the very image of this same God.

It is this vision of God that informs the version of the commandment to honor the Sabbath that we find in Exodus. “In six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and consecrated it.”

This view of time is one of the gifts Judaism gave to the world. No longer was time marked only by the cycles of the moon or the earth’s orbit around the sun as in other cultures. The seven-day week gave humankind six days to work *and* a day of rest.

God rests—and offers the gift of rest to all creation.

Of course, we can’t *make* people rest—not that Christians haven’t tried over the years. That was one of the lessons I learned as a child. For all our shouting, we didn’t do much to slow down the drivers of those cars.

And here’s the trap we encounter as we try to slow down in a world built for speed: slowing down can lead to anxiety over what is not being done. And that anxiety in turn will lead us to go even faster as we attempt to catch up once more.

So why slow down now? Shouldn’t we just keep going at an ever-faster speed.

We slow down, not for the sake of slowing down, but so that we might give our attention to what matters.

The Gospel of Luke gives us an intriguing story of Jesus. When Jarius, the leader of the synagogue asks Jesus to come to his house because his twelve-year-old daughter is dying. Jesus goes with Jarius, no questions asked.

On the way a woman in the crowd touches him. Jesus stops the push of the crowd in order to speak with that one individual. He could focus not only on what was urgent—the sick child—but what was important in that moment—a woman who had long sought, and long missed healing.

When we look at the picture of Jesus in the Gospels, we see not only a busy Jesus, but also someone who knew when and how to slow down.

And because he could slow down, he was also able to bring the healing power of God to more people. The goal is neither slowness nor rest—as important and necessary as those might be. The goal is something more like our engagement with other people and strengthening our bonds with them.

Again, I go back to my neighbor all those years ago. His concern—his *real* concern was not the speed of the cars. His *real* concern was the children in the neighborhood, their safety, and the well-being all the people up and down our street.

Rest, silence, meditation, *slowing down* are not ends in themselves. We engage in such practices so that we might better engage with one another for the healing of our lives and the healing of our world.

The sign on a restaurant door read: “We are now closed on Mondays because it’s smart to take a day off and do other stuff.”

It is.

Otherwise, we get confused. We start to think that speed is everything. We start to think that we were created so that we might be busy. So, whether it’s Monday, Sunday, Saturday, or some other day, it *is* smart to take a day off and do other stuff. Remember the God who created all of this and enjoy that creation.

As I said, these are just some preliminary thoughts

Resting was good enough for God.

It might even suit you.

May we enter into God’s rest.

¹ Andrew Root, *The Congregation in a Secular Age*, pg. 35.

² Root, pg. 180.