

Finding the Balance

Mark 1:29-39

*Life should be a rhythm of healing,
sabbath, and service.*

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The official Groundhog Day report is now in. Friday was Groundhog Day, and thousands of people gathered in Gobbler's Knob, PA, to see if the resident groundhog, Punxsatawney Phil, would see his shadow. The legend, of course, is that if the groundhog sees his shadow, he is scared back into his burrow, and we have six more weeks of winter. If there is no shadow, we can expect an early spring. A cloudy day on Friday in Gobbler's Knob meant there was no shadow, and thus we can anticipate warmer weather soon, if Phil is to be believed. However, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, the real weather guys, reminded the public on Friday that Phil is only right about 30% of the time. So actually, we should reverse the legend for better results. Still, we keep going through the same ritual year after year.¹

The Groundhog Day prognostication always reminds me of a movie that came out about 30 years ago (really?) called "Groundhog Day."² A cocky weatherman resents being sent to Gobbler's Knob to cover the groundhog, and he gets caught in a time loop, so that he wakes up every morning, and it's Groundhog Day all over again. There is a lot of comedy involved as he tries to deal with the frustration of every day being a repeat of the one before. But eventually he learns to use this new normal for good, and that's when he escapes the time loop.

The Groundhog Day movie reminds me of our need for a meaningful rhythm to our lives. Without some kind of balance, life is a continual exercise in frustration. There are two ways this could go badly. One, like the movie, we don't want every day just to be a repeat of the day before, an endless cycle of the "same ol' same ol'." That would be boring, which is a low level of anger, and we don't want to live in that neighborhood continually.

On the other hand, we don't want to wake up in a new world every day, either. What if you had to decide, every morning, what food is appropriate for breakfast—corn flakes or corn dogs?—or to learn how to brush your teeth? What if every day you had to get a new job, choose your relationships, or learn about your community? There has to be some continuity to our experience, so we can build on the experiences of the past and do better and better day by day. We need a balance.

The Christian life, lived well, has a healthy rhythm to it. There is a balance of intake and output that leads to joy, peace, and satisfaction. Nicholas Wolterstorff, an American philosopher and theologian, said, “It seems to me that the Christian life, when properly lived, is a rhythmic alternation between turning toward God in worship and running toward the world in love and with a passion for justice, between congregation and dispersal, liturgy and labor, worship and work, adoration and obedience.”³

This is a rhythm we see in the daily life of Jesus. The Gospel of Mark gives us a glimpse of the Jesus balance in the very first chapter. Last week’s text and this week’s combined span 24 hours—a day in the life of Jesus. On a Sabbath morning, what we would call Saturday, Jesus went to the synagogue, proclaimed the good news of the nearness of the Kingdom of God, and cast an unclean spirit out of a man in the congregation. Because demons were believed to inhabit people and cause all sorts of disease, this would have been considered a public healing. We talked about that last week.

Then Mark says Jesus went immediately to the home of Simon Peter and Andrew. Mark loves to say “immediately,” but in this case it could be true. If you go to Capernaum today, you can see the ruins of the synagogue (actually one that was built on the foundation of the one that stood there in the time of Jesus). Then, not 50 steps away, archeologists have excavated the house of Simon Peter. Simon, his brother Andrew, and their families lived next door to the synagogue! So after service, it was lunchtime, and Jesus went to their house.

The problem was, Peter’s mother-in-law was sick with a fever. This messed up the rhythm of the household. So Jesus took her by the hand, and the fever left her. She was so well so quick that she got up and began to serve her son-in-law and his friends. This was a private healing, but Jesus also got lunch out of the deal.

News travels fast in a small community, and that evening, as soon as Sabbath was over, everybody who was sick and everybody who had somebody sick came to Simon’s house to see Jesus. There were restrictions on walking and working on the Sabbath, but as soon as three stars appeared in the sky, Sabbath was officially over, and they could move about the town.⁴ Jesus healed people far into the night.

These public and private healings were important because healing was a sign of the inbreaking of the Kingdom of God. The Greek word for healing is the same word used for salvation. Jesus was bringing the grace of salvation to his adopted home town.

Jesus must have been exhausted after such a busy and draining day, but he still got up the next morning before dawn and went out to a deserted place to pray. Jesus had to spend time with his Father. Over and over in the Gospels, we see Jesus retreating to have time to pray. Prayer was the engine that powered his life. It wasn’t long before Peter and the others came looking for Jesus. Apparently, another crowd had already gathered, and they were ready for another day of the Jesus show. But Jesus had a different agenda. He said, “*Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also, for that is what I came out to do.*”⁵ That was his mission, to proclaim the good news of the Kingdom. After an early morning rendezvous with God, his spirit was refreshed, and he was locked and loaded for the next thing. From there, Mark says, “*he went throughout all Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.*”⁶

It's not enough just to receive the healing grace of God, or even to develop a deep personal relationship with the Divine. At some point, you have to be deployed into the field. You have to do what you were sent here to do.

During the Civil War, most soldiers were issued single-shot, muzzle-loading rifles. After the Battle of Gettysburg, 27,574 guns were recovered from the battlefield, their owners having fled or died. Incredibly, 18,000 were still loaded! And 12,000 of those had been loaded more than once, one shot jammed on top of another, without ever being fired! One poor guy had apparently loaded his gun twenty-three times without ever actually shooting! Evidently fear or the chaos of battle deafened or confused the soldiers.⁷

Let's not forget what we came here to do. We have good news to share with the world. We have children of God to serve. Let's not leave the battlefield without ever firing a shot.

The effective and productive Christian life has a balanced rhythm, and we see these elements in the life of Jesus. In these 24 hours, we see healing, sabbath and service. Healing and salvation are similar concepts in the New Testament. What we are talking about is receiving the grace of God. Whether that means actual physical or mental healing, or the forgiveness of sins, or the acceptance of Jesus, it's all in the same area. We depend on God to put the broken pieces of our lives back together, so we can serve.

The sabbath rhythm was established by God with Moses on Mount Sinai. It's part of the earliest life instructions given to the people of God. We call them the Ten Commandments, one of which is "*Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy.*"⁸ The Jews clogged up the Sabbath with a million rules, but the essence of sabbath is not to work all the time. Spend part of each week in rest and prayer. This is not just "me-time," hours that we spend to indulge our personal desires—fishing, golf, massages, mani-pedi's—not bad things at all in themselves. But sabbath is God-time, hours that we spend to pray and learn and reflect and draw close to the Source of our healing.

Then we put our saved, healed, sabbath-powered lives into the service of God's kingdom. There are people that need help. There is good news to be shared. There is a positive difference that we can make almost every day of our lives. That's also part of the balance.

Think of our spiritual rhythm as breathing. Breathing is not something we think about most of the time, but it's one of the most important things we do. If you don't believe that, try quitting. Breathing is the fundamental rhythm of life. Often when we want to experience a moment of sabbath, we start with deep cleansing breaths. Experts say that good breathing habits can improve our physical and mental health, and poor breathing can exacerbate a long list of chronic diseases, like asthma, anxiety, high blood pressure, and so forth.⁹

Breathing consists of two actions: inhaling and exhaling. (You're breathing better already, aren't you?) As a spiritual rhythm, inhaling is what we do to fill up our spiritual lungs with the breath of God. This is the intake phase. Inhaling is the rhythm of worship and study and prayer. Inhaling is the reception of the good gifts of God's grace. It's the work of healing. It's filling our well. To change the metaphor, you can't draw water if your well is empty. So breathe.

Inhaling is something we can do all the time. So is the intake of God's grace. You don't have to wait for Sunday, or a class, or a special event to fill your life. It can be done in the little moments you take each day to be aware of God. Wendy Farley, in her book *Beguiled By Beauty*, talks about this dimension of spiritual practice.¹⁰ Sometimes with busy people like business executives, moms, professionals, etc., it's all we can do to grab a few moments of sanity throughout the day. Farley suggests taking a moment to breathe when you take out the garbage. If it's night, and the sky is clear, just pause and look up at

the night sky and inhale the goodness of God’s creation. (Your garbage is in the bag; it won’t stink.)

Or take a moment in the shower in the morning or at night to waste just a little bit of water and feel the goodness and the blessing of a hot shower. We gave out shower tags a few years ago to remind people of their baptism and just to thank God for the goodness of the day. Does anybody still have those?

First you inhale, then you exhale. If you don’t, the air in your lungs gets stale, and you suffocate. Inhaling has to be followed by exhaling. Receiving the grace of God in worship, prayer, and study has to be followed by service to the cause. God gives us these gifts of grace so we can share our gifts with the world—feeding the hungry, caring for the sick, comforting the brokenhearted, sharing good news with the lost, advocating for justice, being generous with our money. There are so many ways to serve God. But that is our mission, taken straight from the example of Jesus, who gave his life with this understanding: “Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many.”¹¹

Thomas Merton was an American monk who wrote extensively on the balance of the spiritual life in the post-World War II years, as modern life was beginning to get complicated. His words seem even more prophetic in our era of computers, cell phones, internet, and social media. It hasn’t gotten any easier. Merton wrote, “There is a pervasive form of contemporary violence. The rush and pressures of modern life are a form of its innate violence. To allow oneself to be carried away by a multitude of conflicting concerns, to surrender to too many projects, to want to help everyone in everything, ...The frenzy of the activist ... destroys our own inner capacity for peace.”¹²

Let me offer you a word of peace today. The Christian life, lived well, is a balance, a rhythm of healing, sabbath, and service. This is the best way to live in the world. This is the way of Jesus. So just breathe.

¹ <https://www.npr.org/2024/02/02/1228547493/groundhog-day-punxsutawney-phil-spring>.

² Danny Rubin, Harold Ramis, *Groundhog Day* (Columbia Pictures, 1993).

³ Nicholas Wolterstorff in *The Reformed Journal* (Dec. 1986). *Christianity Today*, Vol. 31, no. 11.

⁴ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Mark, Revised Edition* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975), 39.

⁵ Mark 1:38.

⁶ Mark 1:39.

⁷ Lee Eclov, “Homo Unius Libri,” *Preaching Today* newsletter, 5/26/21.

<https://www.nps.gov/spar/learn/historyculture/evolution-of-the-breechloader.htm>.

⁸ Exodus 20:8.

⁹ James Nestor, “The Healing Power of Proper Breathing,” *The Wall Street Journal* (5-21-20).

¹⁰ Wendy Farley, *Beguiled By Beauty* (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox Press, 2020), in James Howell Weekly Preaching Notions “What Can We Say February 4?”

<https://jameshowellswweeklypreachingnotions.blogspot.com/>.

¹¹ Mark 10:43-45.

¹² Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (New York: Image Books, 1968), 81.