A Slow and Gradual Emergence into the New Year

Psalm 46:9-11 God makes wars cease to the end of the earth; God breaks the bow, and shatters the spear; God burns the shields with fire.

‘Be still, and know that I am God! I am exalted among the nations, I am exalted in the earth.’

The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge. Selah

Matthew 11:26-30 ‘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.’

Julia concluded her sermon last Sunday saying, “Sometimes the new year comes with a bang and we have big intentions, but my instinct tells me that the early weeks of ***this*** year call us into a time of gentleness, reflecting, processing, trusting the unknown, noticing new ways of being in community with one another and with others around us,” what she later described to me as “a slow and gradual emergence into the new year.”

I don’t know about you, but that was music to my ears.

For many of us, Advent is a wonderfully intense time, with family activities and other holiday preparations, and we may arrive at Christmas Day quite spent and ready for a long winter’s nap.

But then there are New Year’s Resolutions! Yes, by all means, we need to strive to meet our goals. But in order to do so, we need to keep breathing and perhaps napping. Taking time not only for all the tasks that need to be done, but also taking time for that which is ***not*** task-oriented…pausing, pondering, wondering, noticing, observing, paying attention to both doing and being.

Might what we need is a slow gradual emergence into this new year?

Sometimes I can barely breathe when I think about what’s going on in our nation and world today.

Global warming; poverty and food scarcity; knife and gun violence; mass shootings; racial discrimination & profiling; mass incarceration of young black men for nonviolent crimes; white Christian nationalism; eroding democracy and political extremism; the refugee crisis; the war in Ukraine, political strife in Peru and Brazil. Takes my breath away!

We feel a sense of urgency to do something about these and other issues, as we should. But don’t we need to put on our own oxygen masks before assisting others?! We need to keep breathing!

Is it possible that in our preoccupation with the horrors in our nation and world today, we might also find rest, peace, and calmness? Strengthening our inner life, finding wholeness and peace, is just as important as our work in the world.

Many Scripture texts call us to action, but many others call us to contemplation, stillness, and rest.

The same Bible that says, “Share your food with the hungry, and give shelter to the homeless. Give clothes to those who need them, and do not hide from relatives who need your help” (Isaiah 58:7) says, “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:26).

The same Bible that says, “We must show love through actions that are sincere, not through empty words” (1 John 3:18) says, “Be still before the Lord and wait patiently” (Psalm 37:7).

The same Jesus who tells his disciples, “Heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, and cast out devils” (Matthew 10:8) says, “Come away by yourselves to a desolate place and rest awhile” (Mark 6:31).

A slow gradual emergence into the new year might include laying down our burdens, finding rest, being still, waiting patiently.

Sounds easy, right? But those of us who pride ourselves in our busyness, productivity and hard-work-ethic may not find it so easy.

And I, for one, find it almost impossible. I’m one of those people who is high-strung, live-wired, very excitable, and it’s very difficult to calm myself down when I get all worked about something. So believe me, I’m learning these lessons along with any of you who find this topic relevant.

At last Wednesday’s session of OVER55, Claus Anderson, Professor of Scandinavian Studies at UW-Madison, spoke on the Scandinavian Recipe for Happiness. According to the World Happiness Report, Scandinavian Countries rank as the happiest in the world, with Finland and Denmark in first and second places, and the United States in 19th place. Claus explained that Scandinavian countries balance time-at-work with time-away-from work a lot better than the United States. And unlike Scandinavian countries with guaranteed health care for all, US citizens have the added stress of losing their health care if they lose their jobs.

So in the US, many of us are overworked, worried and stressed . It’s not a solution but perhaps we can laugh at ourselves. So here are a few groaners:

*I’m great at multitasking. I can waste time, be unproductive, and procrastinate all at once.*

*A work week is so rough that after Monday and Tuesday, even the calendar says WTF.*

*Hard work never killed anyone, but why take the chance?*

*I pretend to work as long as they pretend to pay me.*

*I think they picked me for my motivational skills. Everyone always says they have to work twice as hard when I’m around!*

*I have a lot of jokes about unemployed people but none of them work.*

Before we justify our compulsion to work harder and longer, to become more and more productive, we may want to notice the practice of the ancients who knew the value of Sabbath rest?

Pharaoh enslaved the Israelites and imposed on them an impossible production schedule. The production apparatus was at work 24/7. “More bricks! Make more bricks!” Then, after Israel’s deliverance from Egypt, the law of God given at Mt. Sinai, mediated through Moses, included a day off. It was called “the Sabbath.” “Six days you shall labor, but on the seventh day you shall rest; even during the plowing and harvest seasons you must rest” (Exodus 34:21).

Rest? Rest? What a novel idea! Who came up with that?! Well, according to Scripture, it was God’s idea.

From an episode of the Netflix series “New Amsterdam” comes this conversation between Dr. Max Goodwin, the Medical Director of New Amsterdam Hospital, who has just been diagnosed with throat cancer, and his oncologist, Dr. Helen Sharpe:

*Helen: Max, in a few weeks we’re going to start chemo in the mornings and radiation in the evenings.*

*Max: But there’s so much to do.*

*Helen: You’re going to have to prioritize.*

*Max: You mean start saying no?*

*Helen: I mean start saying yes…to you. What do* ***you*** *need, Max?*

After viewing that scene this week, I thought to myself, “When do I ever stop obsessing about all the work I have to do long enough to ask myself, *‘What do I need?’”*

A slow gradual emergence into the new year might include laying down our burdens, finding rest, being still, waiting patiently, taking a full day off from work, asking ourselves the all-important question, “What do I need?”

There’s a fascinating story in the Hebrew Scriptures (1 Kings 18 & 19) of God’s prophet Elijah who puts to the test 450 prophets of Baal as to whose God is more powerful. Elijah’s God wins the challenge, and the prophets of Baal are defeated. It was one of Elijah’s finest moments and greatest accomplishments. But immediately after this amazing feat, Elijah became so depressed and distraught he curled up in a fetal position and prayed that he might die.

We might call this “the Elijah complex.” After we’ve accomplished something grand and glorious, we may then feel depleted, despondent, depressed. I don’t know why that is. It just is.

Feeling very sorry for himself, Elijah complains to God (1 Kings 19:9-10).

The Lord said, “Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the Lord, I am about to pass by.” Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks, but the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. *Guess where God was!*

Our hero Elijah learned a great lesson that day. God is not only in heroic feats of faith and valor, but in a gentle whisper.

A slow gradual emergence into the new year might include laying down our burdens, finding rest, being still, waiting patiently, taking a full day off from work, asking ourselves the important questions, and listening for God in a gentle whisper.

Here’s a very different kind of story in the New Testament, but with a similar message. Jesus and his disciples came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Jesus’ feet listening to what he said. But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, “Lord, don’t you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!” “Martha, Martha,” Jesus answered, “you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed—or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her”(Luke 10:38-42).

Yes, we all know there’s a time to roll up our sleeves and get busy, for there is lots of work to be done, *especially if we’re German*! At the same time, it’s equally important, if not more important, to become very still and quiet, in order to receive a touch of grace or a word of wisdom.

Sitting at the feet of a wise teacher is indeed as important as being about the work to be done.

A slow gradual emergence into the new year might include laying down our burdens, finding rest, being still, waiting patiently, taking a full day off from work, asking ourselves the important questions, listening for God in a gentle whisper, receiving a touch of grace or a word of wisdom.

In many of the psalms, an interesting literary device is used. After a stanza, we often find the word “Selah,” which might be translated “Pause and reflect.” Since the Psalms were sung, some believe the word “Selah” indicated an intermission or a break in the music.

‘Be still, and know that I am God! **Selah** (Psalm 46:10-11).

 Pause and reflect – Take a break or an

 intermission.

‘Be still, and know that I am God! **Selah**

This well may be what Mother Nature is trying to tell us this time of the year. As the turtles, frogs and toads burrow deep below the frost line where the temperatures will not go below freezing, this season of darkness, cold, and ice may be inviting us humans to go deeper as well.

Many plants need shorter days and lower temperatures to become dormant. This way plants can store up energy for new growth. If some fruit trees don't have enough chilling time, they will produce fewer, weaker buds.

This prompts me to ask, “If nature all around us is finding ways to protect itself and store up energy during these cold dark winter months, can we humans learn to do the same?”

Go deeper. Protect yourself. Store up energy for something new to be born.

If Nature herself is making a slow and gradual emergence into the new year, might we accompany her and cooperate with her on this journey?

Activism and Contemplation, a perfect combination. AMEN