

## **Sabbath and Creation Care: The Sabbath Effect**

*by Rebekah Simon-Peter*

Jonathan Ormes, retired NASA scientist, and I made plans to meet while I was on my way to lead a women's retreat on the topic of sabbath and the environment. I wanted to talk with him about my theory that practicing sabbath is an environmentally friendly discipline.

"Absolutely," he said. "In fact, we can tell from space where and when people are observing the sabbath all around the world." "Really?" I asked, "from space?" This was better than I thought.

He said, "We can see that levels of nitrous oxides—byproducts of fossil-fuel combustion, among other things—fluctuate during the week. They go down on Friday in Islamic countries; down on Saturday in Israel; and down on Sunday in the United States, Europe, and Japan. Those levels don't go down at all in China; the numbers stay pretty steady throughout the week. This lowering of nitrous oxide levels is called the sabbath effect or the weekend effect." In other words, the less people drive and the less industry produces, the cleaner the air.

Listening to Dr. Ormes, I marveled at the convergence of science and spirituality. The Scriptures call us to be stewards of the creation; science lets us know how we are doing at it. According to Dr. Ormes, not too well. For the elevated presence of nitrous oxides during the week is connected to ozone smog and acid rain, which are dramatically changing the atmospheric composition.

Perhaps it is no coincidence that the intended outcome of sabbath observance—being refreshed (Exodus 23:12; 31:17)—can also be translated as "paused-for-breath." Childhood asthma is on the increase, as are other respiratory difficulties. All are linked to the quality of our air. Sabbath rest literally clears the air and gives us breathing room. In fact, sabbath reveals itself as the first environmentally friendly biblical covenant. Sabbath is good for people and the earth. It is not a stretch to say that faith grounded in the Bible is "green." Sustainability is built into the very fabric of creation.

Which day should you observe sabbath? Some Christians are adopting the practice of the early church by honoring the creation on the seventh day of the week, Saturday, and the Lord's resurrection on the first day of the week, Sunday. Others reclaim the dual emphases of creation and Christ together on Sunday. Another option is to carve out mini-sabbaths at another time during the week. It may not matter as much which day you set apart as how you start to synchronize your life with the rhythms of creation so that healing may begin.

Sabbath is important for reducing our stress and our impact on the planet, but do not make it impossible to experience sabbath. If you cannot start with a day of rest, how about an hour? Then month by month expand that hour until you have reached a full day of rest. I invite you to try it. You just might like it. I will be right alongside you.

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**Prayer:**

Dear God,

We praise you for your creation. We give thanks for the days we spend outside with our families, for the nights that we can see the stars, and for children climbing trees. We thank you for making all of this possible. Help us to be better stewards of the earth so our children's children can also have these experiences. We yearn to synchronize our lives with the rhythms of creation which lead to healing.

We pray all of this in Jesus' name. Amen.

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**Questions:**

1. Sabbath is a "green" commandment. What other biblical practices help protect the environment?
2. Has the observance of the Sabbath increased or decreased during your lifetime? How about the amount of stuff we think we "need"? How are the two related?
3. What environmentally harmful activities and products can you avoid on the Sabbath? How can you carry that restraint into the rest of the week?