**A Sermon for DaySpring**

By Eric Howell

*“Take Your Whole Self Out”*

Mark 1:35

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From early in Jesus’ ministry we can see the rhythms in his life taking shape, like the tide coming in and going out. Inward, outward. Rest, work. Prayer, ministry. Love God, love neighbors. Contemplative, active.

We see this flow in Mark 1. Jesus goes to the synagogue on the Sabbath. Then he heals in the village. Jesus goes to a desolate place to pray. Then he goes to other villages to heal and preach.

The outward, work, ministry, love of neighbors work Jesus is so famous for is complemented by and surely made possible by the inward, rest, prayer, love of God made possible by Sabbath and wilderness.

I want to say it’s like a dance, a ballet, as the dancer moves with effortless grace. Maybe, maybe it is for Jesus but for most of us, if it is a dance, if we’re to emulate this flow, we’re a little less graceful than a ballet dancer. Trying to live inward/outward spiritually, we might be more like kids on roller skates doing the hokey-pokey. We stumble around, fall down, look pretty foolish trying to perform the dance. But the ultimate aim of the hokey-pokey is exactly the point. What you’re learning to do, what it’s all about, is sometimes to put your whole self in and sometimes to take your whole self out.

Our whole self is required of us in work, ministry, and love of neighbor. My hunch is that most of us already have a pretty good idea of that. A lot of folks feel like their whole self and then some is in all the time. We’re a society good at being active. It doesn’t mean we’re not ever lazy, but it does mean we know what it means to go, go, go. We know what it means to put our whole self in. I’m less convinced we know how to take our whole self out, for a little while, amongst all those demands and all that activity.

Sabbath and wilderness are the names given to the out: the rest, prayer, and renewal Jesus modeled. The *time* of renewal is called Sabbath. Israel was given a day of rest each week, a whole day whose character was intimately anchored in God’s creation, and as justice for those who work at your demand. Everyone needs meaningful work. Everyone needs time for renewal. We were created this way. Sabbath was an integral part of the way God shaped our lives and so we’re not surprised that in Mark 1 Jesus went to the place of worship on the Sabbath day to join with others in liturgically guided worship of God.

As Sabbath is holy time designated for renewal, wilderness is holy geography. Jesus honors the Sabbath, and Jesus retreats to the wilderness. That’s what some translations call it. Wilderness. Other English versions are less poetic. They say desert, lonely place, deserted place, solitary place, isolated place, deserted, secluded. The word that they’re all translating is *eremos*. You may know the word eremitical. You may know the word hermit. Same root, same idea. Jesus went to be a hermit for a while, in a place where you can still be such a thing: alone, solitary, quiet, unhurried and unproductive, out. Sabbath and wilderness: sacred time and space you don’t control or make productive. You enter them, and they enter you. It’s not productive work; it’s breathing space for the soul.

What we have in Sabbath time and wilderness geography is time that produces no value, and geographic space that has no monetized usefulness. As you know, there are people in the world who see such time and space as a problem, and people who exist to eliminate time and space that produce no value. What is utterly life-giving to the spirituality minded is regarded as careless wastefulness by others. I was trained as one of them. I suspect you were too, even if you didn’t get a degree in it like I did.

We’ve all learned this well in modern times. In the early 1900s Frederick Taylor and Frank Gilbreth devised a scientifically analytic approach to work, especially repetitive tasks, like brick laying or assembly line manufacturing. Gilbreth was troubled as a young man that each of the bricklayers teaching him how to do the work did the job differently. Unsatisfied, he sought out to discover the very best way to do it by breaking down the work of turning a pile of bricks into a brick wall into the very most basic movements: look, reach, grasp, lift, position, set, and so on. By diligent and careful study of many bricklayers all doing those motions differently, he figured out how to eliminate wasted movements and make bricklaying more efficient. Efficiency meant speed, speed meant value. Wasted time and motion was being squeezed out of the actions of a single bricklayer, later using the same theories on entire manufacturing plants, and from there the whole working world. That’s the dream anyway.

Frederick Taylor took it to the next level with the stopwatch. Taylor timed workers working at their most efficient and extrapolated how much work could be performed in a day if the worker was working most efficiently all day long. Enforcing maximum efficiency, management could set manufacturing quotas for a day’s work. Have you ever seen a UPS driver barrel down your street, skid to a stop at your sidewalk, disappear for a few seconds into the back of the truck, and then sprint to your front door? A few seconds later, back in the truck and off again. You’ve seen that, right? They aren’t doing that for fun. Somewhere at the office, a manager working with a sophisticated computer algorithm has determined how many packages the driver should be able to deliver in an efficient day’s work. UPS deliverymen and women are selected based on their ability to perform at a high level for hours on end. If you can’t cut that, you’ll be done. The packages are strategically loaded into the back of the truck to make this work flow like a brown clad ballet. You know what you haven’t seen? A UPS driver turn left. They figured out a long time ago that by designing vehicle routing to favor right hand turns even if it means longer drives, they would save time, gas, and improve the safety of the drivers. Nothing wasted, not an inch, not a second. What you see coming down your sidewalk is an intricately, scientifically studied process for maximizing value of time and maximizing the value of space. Nothing wasted. Not an inch. Not a second.

I was trained in this thinking. They give degrees in this sort of thing and I got one; I earned one, in Industrial Engineering. I was trained in this way of thinking and enjoyed some of it for sure, though I guess I wasn’t cut out for it. I should have known early on when I applied for a summer engineering internship at a UPS plant. The job was to go on the floor of the warehouse with a stopwatch and evaluate the workers loading trucks with your packages. Did the workers appreciate a college student following them around all day with a stopwatch and a clipboard scribbling notes on every movement they made, looking for ways to make it all go faster? I do not know. I was late for the interview. I didn’t get the job.

We’re taught well that time is a commodity to be used. We’re taught that space is a resource to be mined and that the best use of time and space is what will bring profitability. You think I’m making too much of this? Kids are in select sports in elementary school when they used to climb trees in the backyard and use their imaginations. But that doesn’t get you a scholarship. College students frantically run from one assignment to the next to the next extracurricular activity to the latest update on social media to the next thing. A couple of semesters ago I assigned a 24 hour technology fast to my class. When they heard that, they thought they’d rather just go ahead and die. The thought of an empty wasted day was terrifying. But then they did it, and to a person, they loved it.

Life in this society and time is training you just this way: do not waste time, do not waste space, do not waste energy. That may be why the gospel can seem so, so, so maddening. Sabbath and wilderness do not survive this paradigm for very long. Right at the heart of the Christian life is everything we’ve been taught to eliminate from our productive lives: wasted time and wasted space. Marva Dawn calls worship a Royal Waste of Time. Prayer. Worship. Singing songs. Silence. These are not the building blocks of efficient productivity, but they are the heart of life. This is Sabbath stuff in which we encounter the great abyss of God, as Thomas Merton says.

You can’t commodify worship; you can’t measure the productivity of prayer. The whole purpose of Sabbath time is witness that all time is God’s time, our lives are not our own. Sabbath is wilderness time: empty, expansive. It breathes. It is not to be controlled, or mined, or bulldozed. You don’t make Sabbath efficient or productive. You don’t seek value in Sabbath. It just is, and invites us in slowly, to put the stopwatch and the clipboard down; put them down, the stopwatch and the clipboard and the resume, and the news cycle, and the bank account, and the scantron, and the to-do list, and breathe deeply, and remember you are a human being, not a human doing. You are a child of grace.

Jesus embraced Sabbath and also *eremos*, the deserted, lonely, abandoned places. Wilderness is Sabbath space, the praise of all creation made manifest in wood and stone, water and sky. Of all peoples on earth, Americans are blessed with open spaces. Still though, there are those who don’t yet see that valueless places are the most valuable of all there is. Wallace Stegner wrote in 1960, “Something will have gone out of us as a people if we ever let the remaining wilderness be destroyed; if we permit the last virgin forests to be turned into comic books and plastic cigarette cases; If we drive the few remaining members of the wild species into zoos or to extinction; if we pollute the last clear air and dirty the last clean streams and push our paved roads through the last of the silence, so that never again will Americans be free in their own country from the noise, the exhausts, the stinks of human and automotive waste.”

We must not push paved roads of frenetic work through the last of the silences, whether of space or time, Sabbath or geography. Let there be wasted time and some unfilled space in our lives for stillness, prayer, renewal, tears and laughter. It may be an even earlier morning, or a closet, or a walk in the park. Whenever it is; wherever it is, it is calling to you. Our souls need some wasted time and some open space. As Stegner said of wilderness: We simply need that wild country available to us, even if we never do more than drive to its edge and look in. For it can be a means of reassuring ourselves of our sanity as creatures, a part of the geography of hope.” (Stegner)

Right at the heart of the Jesus life is wilderness time. And right at the heart of the Jesus life is Sabbath space. This is because right at the heart of the gospel are people, always people, all kinds of people who are leftovers, people who are a mess, who are not at the top of their efficiency productivity, the poor, the orphan, the widow, the physically or intellectually disabled, the woman at the well, Jairus’ daughter, the children who flocked to Jesus, the prodigal, the woman caught in adultery, the lost cause, the disappointment, the failure, the sinner, the one who denied he knew Jesus. The gospel is just exactly for all those parts of us called unlovable or meaningless; grace for the shame, peace for the broken, hope for the lost.

We simply need some time and space to take our whole self out and know ourselves again for who we are in Christ. Who you are in Christ is not your productivity; it’s you, and you are beautiful.

May you have the grace of time. May you have the grace of space. May you have the grace of silence. May you have the grace of remembering who you are. May you know these as gifts of the God who is not distant, but with you, who will never leave you nor forsake you. You are beloved.

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