

*Based on *Leviticus 25:1-7. The land gets a year of complete and total rest.*

**Incarnational translation below*

In the ancient world, in those lands with four seasons, planetary pilgrims celebrated the season of autumn with festivals for the harvest. Our Fall Festivals and even the uniquely American Thanksgiving holiday are remnants of those times when food in its autumn abundance was gathered and stored in a celebration of completion and contentment.

God, through the earth, has provided once more!

But lingering beneath the rejoicing and the feasting lay a primal fear for winter. Will there be enough to last until spring?

In honor of this primal fear, some cultures reserved the last sheaf of grain to be harvested from the field for a ritual of remembrance. This last sheaf of grain, this reminder that life does spring forth from the land – it always has and it always will – this last sheaf of grain was carried into the home and placed on the hearth as a living testament to the promise of the land to provide in perpetuity. And a caution not to take any offering from the land for granted.

The ancient world of our Scriptures was not, and is not today, a land of four seasons. Yet they, too, understood the sacred rhythms of creation in their two-season land. There is a time to sow, they said. And a time to reap. There is a time to plant, they said. And a time to pluck up what is planted.

And, as our Lesson for today insists, there is a time to let the land lie fallow.

“Take six years to sow your fields, prune your vineyards, and take in your harvests,” God tells Moses to tell the people. “But the seventh year shall become a Sabbath of complete and total rest, a Sabbath to God.”

Letting the land lie fallow, it turns out, is incredibly good for the soil. Fallowing brings up potassium and phosphorus from deep below the surface, benefitting crops that are planted later in the cycle. Fallowing improves the moisture holding capacity of the soil and increases beneficial microorganisms in the soil. Studies have shown that a field that has been allowed to lie fallow for just a year produces a higher crop yield when it is finally planted.

Letting the land lie fallow is not just good biblical practice, a commandment on high with all those other “Thou shalt nots.” Letting the land lie fallow is good *agricultural* practice! Even so, it is a scary thing, to set aside an entire year to let the entire land lie fallow. Letting one field among many lie fallow for a short period of time is one thing. But the entire land? For an entire year?

Even in the ancient world – *especially* in the ancient world – letting the land lie fallow exacerbates that primal fear we feel in autumn. Making it through one winter is hard enough, the ancients would have said. How in the world will we make it through four winters in a row, with no spring summer or autumn in between? Especially if we have to leave the aftergrowth of our crops and our vineyards only for the animals?

Our biblical ancestors ask this very question a few verses later in the same chapter as our Lesson: *Should you ask*, this chapter from Leviticus continues, “*What shall we eat in the seventh year, if we may not sow or gather in our crop?*” the answer is the same as the lesson of manna in the wilderness so many moons before: the provision of the sixth year will be enough to see you through.

Just trust.

God *will* provide.

I don't know about you, but I find that really hard to believe, even though you pay me to believe it! Really, Moses? If we stop what we are doing for *an entire year*, we are just supposed to trust God will provide. I do not think so. Especially today when we feel so far removed from the land and so beholden to a twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, always plugged in culture that will not let us rest. We do not know how to let the land of this earth or the sacred land of our bodies rest even one day, let alone an entire year. Come on, Pastor Gusti, I can hear you thinking, this sabbatical year is a nice idea. But what would happen to the stock market?

And that is exactly the point.

In order for the sabbatical year to work, *the entire society* needs to spend those other six years preparing for it, the same way the ancients in four season societies prepared for winter. The commitment to the sabbatical year requires all of us to live just as differently in those other six years as we do in the sabbatical year itself. The commitment to the sabbatical year requires us to take the long view. To think through to the seventh year, instead of just for today. Not unlike the commitment to think through to the seventh generation, as the ancients on our own land base did. The commitment to the sabbatical year invites us to set aside the anxiety and fear – and even the greed – of the moment in favor of a rhythm of work and rest and feasting and fasting that honors the sacred cycles embedded within creation itself.

Our bodies – formed from the land and returning to the land – need this sacred rhythm of rest, too.

When we rest our bodies, our sympathetic nervous system – which controls our fight or flight response – gets a chance to relax. Our levels of cortisol – the stress hormone – decrease. Our immune system gets stronger. (Wouldn't that be great, in the middle of a pandemic!) Our brains store long term memories better. When we rest our bodies, our bodies function better. Otherwise, the entire body politic ends up in a state of hyper-stressed fight-or-flight suppressed immune system chaos, taking it all out on one another and the earth itself. Which is exactly what is happening right now.

Okay, Pastor Gusti, I can hear you thinking. That is all fine and good, but I've got bills to pay. A mortgage to cover. A job that requires weekends and holidays. I can't even get one day of rest, much less an entire year!

And again, that is the point. The sabbatical year is not something any one of us can do on our own. In order for the sabbatical year to work, the entire economic foundation of our society must be reimagined. In order for the sabbatical year to work, we have to live differently every other year as well. All of us. All of the time.

Good luck with that, Pastor Gusti, I can hear you thinking. And that is also the point. Maybe we cannot – yet – change economic policy or land policy or climate policy worldwide or even nationwide. But we *can* act locally while we think globally. We can start right here with our own congregation.

Because the truth is, even churches need to let the land lie fallow. We may think we are at our best as a congregation when we are busy, busy, busy. We may think we are at our best with packed pews and multiple ministries for members of all ages. And those things are good, do not get me wrong.

But the sacred cycles of the seasons are embedded in churches, too. We need our rest, too, as the COVID-enforced sabbatical year has all too painfully revealed. Our kids our over-programmed. Our parents are pulled in too many directions. And we are all, let's just be honest way too Zoomed out to be excited about much of anything these days.

We are walking through a COVID-enforced fallow period together. We have had to adapt. We have had to adjust. We have had to let go.

But fallowing is just as healthy for churches as it is for the land! It may look like not much is happening on the surface. But just like the fallowing land, in a fallowing church, from deep below the surface, new leadership is emerging. A generational shift in perspective and purpose is unfolding. A promise is gestating for the spring that will still come. This fallow period may, in fact, be the most *fertile* season of all!

In the bulb, there *is* a flower. From this fallow field, new life *will be* born. Because in the Divine Realignment of this Sabbatical Year, in this COVID-enforced fallowing, we are learning once more how to wax and wane with the moon, ebbing and flowing. Always fully present, even if not fully visible. Following the flow with our bodies and our minds, in gratitude for it all.

Let the church say, Amen!

**Incarnational translation of Leviticus 25:1-7*

When Moses was on Mount Sinai, God said:

“Say this to the Israelites:

*‘When you enter the land I am offering you,
the land shall keep a Sabbath to God.*

*Take six years to sow your fields,
prune your vineyards,
and take in your harvests.*

*But the seventh year shall become a Sabbath of complete and total rest,
a Sabbath to God.*

Thou shalt not sow your fields or prune your vineyards.

*Thou shalt not reap the aftergrowth of your crops
or harvest the grapes of your untended vines.*

*The land gets a year of complete and total rest.
The Sabbath itself will produce enough food for all of the people:
the landowners, the workers and the immigrants.
Only the animals get to eat the aftergrowth and unharvested grapes.’’*