

Sabbaths for the Land

Some years ago, I was driving north from Edmonton to a Canadian farm family on the 54th parallel. Soon I would be stopping for tea with them. As I approached Neerlandia-- the name of their community-- I was startled by a Timber Wolf crossing the road in front of me. A few minutes later I was even more startled with their answer to my anxious question, "Do you have Timber Wolves around here?" Their reply was an excited "Yes!" This Christian family treasured the Timber Wolf as God's creature, to be kept along with the rest of the land they held in trust for their Creator.

Equally startling was finding that they allowed their barley fields to lie fallow every second year, providing **rest** for the land. Their reason? "The Bible requires it." As explanation, the college-educated father and husband recounted Exodus 25 and Leviticus 25-26. Exodus 23:10 commands: "For six years you are to sow your fields and harvest the crops, but during the seventh year let the land lie unplowed and unused." And God, in Leviticus 25:2b, requires "When you enter the land I am going to give you, the land itself must observe a Sabbath to the Lord." The land must not be relentlessly pressed.

In our own weekly sabbath observance, we learn its value as a time of recuperation, rejuvenation, and restoration-- a time to get off the treadmill and pull everything together again. Its value is similar for the land, and the Bible requires it.

There is a long-standing rabbinical dictum, "Turn it about, turn it about, for everything you need to know is in it." In applying this to the land's Sabbath-- as we turn things over in our minds, and ponder them deeply we ask, "Is the land just the soil? Does it include the earthworms, birds, and other creatures?" Such "turning it about" will show that "land" as the Bible uses it refers to a fully-operating part of God's Creation; it includes all the creatures in it. The land **and its creatures** must be give their sabbath rests. Our "turning it about" will also bring us to consider sabbaths for non-agricultural parts of Creation, such as rivers, ponds, and marshes; it will also bring us to make proper preparations for the land's sabbaths. Pondering on God's requirement for a Sabbath for the land, as for the Sabbath day, is fertile ground for deep and continuing thought and discussion.

But didn't that Neerlandian farm family let their land rest every **second** year, instead of every **seventh**? I asked the farmer about this, of course, and was directed to the New Testament. "You remember Christ's teaching about how the Sabbath of the week is made for people, and not the other way around? Well, the same is true for the land. The Sabbath is made for the land, and not the land for the Sabbath." To which I replied, "But why every **second** year?" His answer? "Because that is what the land needs." What he was telling me was that with limited rainfall and this high latitude the land would be degraded if were forced to produce more often. He explained that Jesus Christ revealed the **principle** of the Sabbath, while avoiding legalism. Later I read a New York Times story reporting how a modern farmer in Israel sold the land to an Arab every

seventh year and bought it back the following year in order not to violate the Bible's legal requirement. It brought me to a deeper meaning of Christ's teaching.

Today, as I travel through the countryside and across continents, I see some lands that need rest: some every seven years, some every other year, and some permanent sabbath. I also see once-occupied lands now desolate, causing Leviticus 26:35 to reverberate in my mind: "All the time that it lies desolate, the land will have the rest it did not have during the Sabbath you lived in it." If we fail to give Creation times of rest and recuperation, Creation may no longer support us.

As the weekly Sabbath is made for people and animals the Sabbath for the land is made for the wider Creation. The Sabbaths are some of God's provisions for keeping and protecting people, families, animals, and all Creation from being relentlessly pressed. May whatever part of Creation you keep under your care enjoy its sabbath rests!

Published as:

DeWitt, C. B. 1994. Sabbaths for the Land. *Lutheran Woman Today* 1994(April):38-39.