

A Sabbath rest remains Finding hope in the face of ecological crisis

Katerina Friesen

I imagine a distant descendant of yours, alive on Earth seven generations from now. Do you have an image in your head? Now imagine that she faces you and asks, “Ancestor, I have been told about the difficult times in which you lived, with wars and preparations for war, hunger and homelessness, the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer, poisons in the seas and soil and air, the dying of many species. It is hard to believe. Was that really true? Tell me. What was it like for you to live in the midst of that?” So began a series of questions from the future during an

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imaginative exercise that a friend and I recently tried during our weekly prayer and meditation time.¹

My friend’s final inquiry during our exercise gave me pause: “Ancestor, where did you find the strength and joy to continue in your work, despite all the obstacles and discouragements?” I sat in silence for a long time before a confessional answer welled up in me: “I believe in a God who makes a way out of no way!” Tears suddenly came to my eyes.

“But sometimes, when I look honestly at our present realities, I find it so hard to find hope that God will make a way.”

How *do* we find hope that God is making all things new? In the same way that during our reflective exercise my “descendant” wondered what it was like to live during these times, I now turn to our faith ancestors in scripture. What inspired their belief in the midst of difficult times and assaults on their hope? In this article, I consider the Sabbath rest described in Hebrews 3:1–4:11 by one ancestor in faith, and ask how hope for a present and future Sabbath rest for all creation can inform our faith in the midst of today’s intersecting ecological and economic crises.

Hebrews 3:1–4:11 and Sabbath rest

The book of Hebrews was written sometime between 65 and 100 CE by an anonymous author. The recipients, likely Jewish converts who continued to meet in the synagogue, were undergoing a “crisis of commitment.”² Jesus had promised to return, but the expected *parousia* had not come. What did it mean to be a Christian disciple when the resurrected Christ was not with them

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physically and they were enduring persecution, or at least living in a Greco-Roman culture unsupportive of their Christian faith? The author of Hebrews wrote this “word of exhortation” (13:22) to encourage the converts’ faith.³

In Hebrews 3:1–4:11 Sabbath rest is a major theme the author uses in his exhortation. The author places his encouragement to enter God’s Sabbath rest in the context of Israel’s opportunity to enter the promised land (Numbers 14–15), as described by the psalmist in Psalm 95. Much of Hebrews 3 is an exposition of Psalm 95, a psalm that would have been familiar to Jewish converts because it is read in synagogues every Friday as part of the liturgy welcoming *Shabbat*.⁴ It is to the intertextual layering of Hebrews 3, Psalm 95, and Numbers 14–15 that we now turn.

Hebrews 3:7–11 quotes the Septuagint version of Psalm 95:7b–11, an account of Numbers 14–15, which tells of how the Israelites stopped at Kadesh and failed to enter the promised land:

*Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says,
“Today, if you hear his voice,
do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion,
as on the day of testing in the wilderness,
where your ancestors put me to the test,
though they had seen my works for forty years.
Therefore I was angry with that generation,
and I said, ‘They always go astray in their hearts,
and they have not known my ways.’
As in my anger I swore,
‘They will not enter my rest.’”*⁵

Numbers 14 was a low point in the history of the people of God.⁶ After escaping Egypt, crossing through the Red Sea, and journeying through the wilderness for forty years, they set up camp on the border of Canaan, on the verge of coming into a place of rest, but they believed a bad report and refused to enter the promised land. So close, and yet they turned away!

Interpreting *today* today

Despite the Israelites' disobedience, the promise of rest remains! The word *today* is the key that unlocks our understanding of Sabbath rest in Hebrews 3:1–4:11. The author of Hebrews again and again emphasizes the word *today* from Psalm 95:7b, exhorting his readers not to turn away, because the Sabbath rest “still remains for the people of God” (Heb. 4:9). *Today* is thus an ever-present opening to the in-breaking future of God's rest.

Today can be understood eschatologically—that is, through God's work outside history breaking into the present creation.

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Today is a *kairos* time—an urgent, critical time that demands decision, faith, and action. The passage above weaves together three interrelated times: the past time of Joshua and those who rebelled in the desert, the promise of rest renewed in the Psalms, and God's continued saving action in the present.⁷ Christ, the new Moses who is faithful and obedient (Heb. 3:1–6), makes entry into God's rest possible *today*.

Understood in light of the eschatological today, what the author means by Sabbath rest is something we can now begin to approach.

Sabbath rest is salvation, the archetypal movement from wilderness to promised land. It is the indwelling presence of God in creation, overcoming death and evil, already experienced in Christ's resurrection. This Sabbath rest can be experienced now and in the future, and it is always available to those who are faithful through Christ.⁸

Creation as house

I propose an ecological interpretation of Hebrews 3:1–4:11 for

today that extends creation from the people of God (4:9) to all other parts of the household of God's creation: rivers, animals, plants, and more. The word *house* is a word ample enough to encompass the human and nonhuman realm. Hebrews 3:6 says, "Christ, however, was faithful over God's *house* as a son, and we are his *house* if we hold firm the confidence and the pride that belong to hope" (my italics). This verse refers to the people who hold firm in hope as God's house. Yet the book of Hebrews also uses the Greek word for house—*oikia*—in a range of meanings, including building, Israel, family, God's tabernacle, heaven, and creation.⁹

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Our modern English words *economy* and *ecology* both stem from the root word *oikos*, and I believe that if our earth is to flourish, these two terms, too long disconnected, must be reconciled. What new understandings might emerge from the perspective of creation as a household, our basic economic unit? Christ who is the head of the house and its goal (Heb. 1:2; Col. 1:16) may also be seen as creation's indwelling homemaker. Christ is at work making our house a home, a place fit for all creatures to dwell in, in safety. Christ is ensuring food and provision for the whole household. But rot threatens the structures of the house, undermining the renovating efforts of the homemaker. Sickness afflicts its inhabitants. Indeed, given our present *oikos*-crisis, it would not be overly dramatic to say with some environmental ethicists that ours is a house on fire.¹⁰

A Sabbath rest for all creation

If we can read Hebrews 3:1–4:11 ecologically as a word for the household of all creation *today*, what might the promise of Sabbath rest mean for our time? The Jewish mindset, underlying the writings of the first-century writer of Hebrews, was deeply ecological. Seeing land-based principles behind the Sabbath, then, is not a new understanding but a rediscovery of an ancient one. Most readers will already be familiar with the redistributive economic principles of the Jubilee tradition, which radically disrupted society's tendencies toward accumulation and exploitation. Seen

in light of Jubilee, Sabbath rest includes economic redistribution, freedom from bondage to debt and slavery, and rest for the land from its bondage to productivity.¹¹

A second, related understanding of Sabbath is that it is an end to work. In Genesis 2:2, which Hebrews 3:4 cites, God finishes the labor of creation and rests on the seventh day. But in contrast to the other six days, this seventh day has no evening, no end. For this reason, some rabbinic traditions have interpreted Sabbath as the final end or goal of creation itself.

Sabbath and restorative labor

Jesus throws a wrench in the “no work” interpretation of the seventh day. He worked on the Sabbath by healing people and picking grain to eat with his disciples. I see Jesus’s actions as reinterpreting the Sabbath tradition of rest from work in a way different from the interpretation of the scribes and Pharisees. His work is not burdensome; it is restorative labor, work that contributes to life and shalom for all.

If the Sabbath is creation’s end goal and Jesus worked on the Sabbath, how then might our own daily living be restorative and not destructive? How might we see the Sabbath rest promised to us *today* not as an everlasting retirement in the clouds but as everlasting life as co-creators—or “partners” (Heb. 3:14)—with Christ in the renewal of God’s creation?

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Gopal Dayaneni, an organizer with Movement Generation, an Oakland-based environmental justice collective, speaks about the need for restorative labor. Movement Generation sees the separation, degradation, and enslavement of our work to the industrial growth economy as the central cause of climate change. He says:

It’s the exploitation, the extraction of our own work from the web of life and subordinating it to the chains of the market, that [has] created the conditions that we now are up against. It’s that pool of carbon that’s been wielded like a chainsaw against the rest of the natural world and has made [possible] the unleashing of oil, of fossil fuels, of

*industrial development, of all of these things on the world.*¹²

Sabbath worship

A vision of Sabbath rest calls us to re-place and reintegrate our work within the web of life. I believe that worship must be part of this shift, returning us as humans to right relations. Praise and

A vision of Sabbath rest calls us to re-place and reintegrate our work within the web of life. Worship must be part of this shift, returning us as humans to right relations. Praise and gratitude are radical acts, acknowledging God as the center of our universe, the giver of life abundant.

gratitude are radical acts, acknowledging God as the center of our universe, the giver of life abundant. Worship engenders awe, love, and contentment, all of which dethrone the wanton waste, avarice, and restless discontent formed in us by our scarcity-driven market economy. Through our collective gratitude, we enjoy the gifts God has given us in creation, gifts that are good in and of themselves, gifts we cannot somehow improve by technological means. Praise stretches our imaginations to reject the status quo as our only possible future, and it readies us for entrance into God's Sabbath.

Worship also softens our hearts. Remember what the psalmist said about the hearts of those who failed to enter the promised land (Ps. 95:7b)? They were hard, like the stone-cold heart of Pharaoh in his refusal to liberate the people. In Hebrews 3:1–4:11, hard hearts are connected to disobedience and unbelief.¹³ We might say that soft hearts (orthopathy), obedience (orthopraxy), and faithful belief (orthodoxy) are all connected! Thus, our ethics and our worship must be integrated in order for us to enter into the Sabbath rest, where we may deeply enjoy the renewed world with God forever.

Maintaining confidence in the God who makes a way

As much as we are poised on the precipice of irreversible destruction in this era that's been called the Anthropocene, marked by human-caused mass extinction of life, I am confident that we are also standing at the edge of what some have called the Great Turning. Today is indeed a *kairos* time. The question remains, will

we be able to enter rightly into what people have described as the Beloved Community, the Great Economy, and the Community of Creation?

The Holy Spirit tells us that the *today* of Sabbath rest remains, and the Spirit reminds us not to harden our hearts and turn away from this promise: “But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called ‘today,’ so that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. For we have become partners of Christ, if only we hold our first confidence firm to the end” (3:13–14). The phrase “first confidence” (v. 14) can also be translated as “initial resolve,” which calls for the continuing life of faith. This is the life of discipleship and also of decisive action. It takes a good deal of this initial resolve to turn away from death and toward life, and to join Christ in making a restful home out of a household that has been turned into a factory.

When my friend asked, “Ancestor, where did you find the strength and joy to continue in your work, despite all the obstacles and discouragements?” I confessed, “I believe in a God who makes a way out of no way! But sometimes, I find it so hard to find hope that God will make a way when I look honestly at our present realities.” My friend listened to my confession, and he replied: “I have heard it said that when Moses and the people came to the waters, with the sea in front and Pharaoh’s army behind, the waters did not part right away. They had to step into the water, first up to their ankles, and then up to their knees. . . . It wasn’t until the waters finally reached their noses that God separated the waters.”

I don’t know how these rising waters are going to part. But let us not lose our initial resolve. Let us make every effort to enter! May the God who makes a way out of no way give us the faith, hope, and confidence to step into the waters and enter the Sabbath rest that still remains.

Notes

¹ Joanna Macy and Molly Young Brown, *Coming Back to Life: Practices to Reconnect our Lives, Our World* (Gabriola Island, BC: New Society Publishers, 1998).

² Edgar McKnight and Christopher Church, *Hebrews-James*, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Pub., 2004), 13.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*, 107.

⁵ Scripture quotations are from the NRSV.

⁶ Ibid., 99.

⁷ Ibid., 100–101.

⁸ The theology of Jürgen Moltmann has been helpful to me in understanding an eschatological framework for Sabbath and creation.

⁹ Fred B. Craddock et al., *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 12: *The Letter to the Hebrews, the Letter of James, the First and Second Letters of Peter, the First, Second, and Third Letters of John, the Letter of Jude, the Book of Revelation* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1998), 46.

¹⁰ Mary DeMocker, "If Your House Is on Fire: Kathleen Dean Moore on the Moral Urgency of Climate Change," *The Sun* 444 (December 2012); online at http://thesunmagazine.org/issues/444/if_your_house_is_on_fire.

¹¹ See Ched Myers, *The Biblical Vision of Sabbath Economics* (Washington, DC: Tell The Word Press, 2001).

¹² Gopal Dayaneni of the Movement Generation Justice and Ecology Project, Organizing for Resilience; Oakland, October 10, 2013; online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aL9R4CG1I-U#t=2311> (37:00–38:30).

¹³ "Disobedience" and "unbelief" are both derived from same Greek root, *apisteō*, and are used interchangeably. See Craddock et al., *New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 12: 50.

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