

# DISRUPTIVE GRACE

REFLECTIONS ON GOD, SCRIPTURE,  
AND THE CHURCH

WALTER BRUEGGEMANN

EDITED AND INTRODUCED BY CAROLYN J. SHARP

Fortress Press  
Minneapolis

DISRUPTIVE GRACE  
Reflections on God, Scripture, and the Church

Copyright © 2011 Fortress Press, an imprint of Augsburg Fortress. All rights reserved. Except for brief quotations in critical articles or reviews, no part of this book may be reproduced in any manner without prior written permission from the publisher. Visit <http://www.augsburgfortress.org/copyrights/> or write to Permissions, Augsburg Fortress, Box 1209, Minneapolis, MN 55440.

Scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright © 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Other acknowledgments begin on p. 379.

Cover image: © Estate of Milton Resnick. Courtesy Cheim & Read, New York.  
Photo: Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, NY.  
Cover design: Laurie Ingram

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*  
Brueggemann, Walter.

Disruptive grace : reflections on God, Scripture, and the church / Walter Brueggemann ;  
edited and introduced by Carolyn J. Sharp.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-0-8006-9794-5 (alk. paper)

1. Theology. 2. Bible. O.T.—Theology. I. Sharp, Carolyn J. II. Title.

BX9886.Z8B78 2010

230°.0411—dc22

2010044669

The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of American National Standard for Information Sciences — Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z329.48-1984.

Manufactured in the U.S.A.

15 14 13 12 11 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Moses, the great voice of infinity, has in purview the needy circumstance of immigrants, widows, and orphans—Israel's characteristic triad of vulnerable people. But Moses can imagine that even these powerless may exercise their voice of engagement, a voice that will be heard by the Lord of the covenant:

You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt. You shall not abuse any widow or orphan. If you do abuse them, when they cry out to me, I will surely heed their cry; my wrath will burn, and I will kill you with the sword, and your wives shall become widows and your children orphans. (Exod 22:21-24)

In a second commandment, the cry may be on the lips of the poor:

If you lend money to my people, to the poor among you, you shall not deal with them as a creditor; you shall not exact interest from them. If you take your neighbor's cloak in pawn, you shall restore it before the sun goes down; for it may be your neighbor's only clothing to use as cover; in what else shall that person sleep? And if your neighbor cries out to me, I will listen, for I am compassionate. (Exod 22:25-27)

YHWH will hear! YHWH will hear the cry of the powerless outsider—immigrant, widow, orphan, poor. It is impossible to imagine Pharaoh hearing any such cry, for the totalizing system had silenced all such voices. The narrative shows, however, that the totalizing system of silence cannot be sustained. The dialogic practice of "cry-hear" that engages the suffering and the divine yields something new. It only requires, in narrative performance, always again, to depart totalism for the infinity of YHWH's *shalom*. The paradigm continues to be verified by breaks of pain toward *shalom*, even in our contemporary world.<sup>10</sup> How shameful that the church, in its characteristic interpretive practice, has managed to siphon off the risk and the wisdom of this narrative. There are still pharaonic quotas. There are still cries of pain. There are still divine commands to "let go." The narrative always waits, yet again, for another daring performance of contest and of alternative.

## CHAPTER 3

### Sabbath as Antidote to Anxiety

THERE IS NO DOUBT that anxiety is a constant of the human condition.<sup>1</sup> It may well be, with Rollo May, that we live in "an age of anxiety," a condition that has healthy and/or pathological dimensions to which we may respond in psychological, pastoral, and therapeutic ways. Given that generic acknowledgment, it occurs to me that anxiety of an acute kind is particularly pathological and peculiarly poignant in our society just now and that it constitutes the central social reality to which we seek to make pastoral response. Without denying or minimizing the broader claim about "the human condition," I want here to pursue a quite specific connection between our current social reality of anxiety and the biblical text. In the end, it may well be that faith in our time and place is precisely "Courage to Be," courage to be practitioners of generosity, hospitality, and forgiveness that are decisively upstream against the security, revenge, and grudge that dominate our society.<sup>2</sup>

#### I

I begin with the Exodus text, where biblical study most properly begins. I begin with this premise that Pharaoh's *system of production and consumption* had, as its major output, systemic anxiety that pervaded every level of society. That system is one of economic consumption, for it is reported in Genesis 47 that Pharaoh achieved a monopoly on the food supply and used food as a weapon, determining who would eat and who would do without (Gen 47:13-26). It is reported, moreover, that the peasants—forced into slavery—signed on for Pharaoh's system. Perhaps they accepted it because they could think of no alternative or because they were too weak to resist or perhaps because they lacked the

courage to imagine outside of Pharaoh's system. For whatever reason, they signed on and, in gratitude to Pharaoh, affirmed: "They said, 'You have saved our lives; may it please my lord, we will be slaves to Pharaoh'" (Gen 47:25). And the narrator adds: "So Joseph made it a statute concerning the land of Egypt, and it stands to this day, that Pharaoh should have the fifth. The land of the priests alone did not become Pharaoh's" (Gen 47:26).

That statement now becomes the paradigmatic story of "masters and slaves," all caught up in anxiety that is intrinsic to the system.<sup>3</sup> Pharaoh is anxious because the slaves might quit or resist or depart. Pharaoh is anxious because the production schedule might not keep pace with the requirements of his ambitious state building program. And in his anxiety he becomes more aggressive and more demanding, devising a complete surveillance system to manage his restless slave population, upon which his system depended.

But the slaves are also infected with anxiety about the system. The slaves are anxious that they might not produce enough, that they will be pushed beyond their capacity to produce, that more will be required of them, that their children are in jeopardy before the insatiable requirements of the system.

Consequently, masters and slaves in this production system collude in the generation of and participation in anxiety that leaves none satisfied. The outcome of collusion and anxiety is expressed in the sharp exchanges of Exodus 5, a narrative account of an anxiety system. Pharaoh issues a frantic command: "But the king of Egypt said to them, 'Moses and Aaron, why are you taking the people away from their work? Get to your labors!' Pharaoh continued, 'Now they are more numerous than the people of the land and yet you want them to stop working!'" (Exod 5:4-5). Pharaoh gives instruction to this supervisors:

You shall no longer give the people straw to make bricks, as before; let them go and gather straw for themselves. But you shall require of them the same quantity of bricks as they have made previously; do not diminish it, for they are lazy; that is why they cry, "Let us go and offer sacrifice to our God." Let heavier work be laid on them; then they will labor at it and pay no attention to deceptive words. (Exod 5:7-9)

The taskmasters and supervisors of the bureaucratic system pass the word along: "So the taskmasters and the supervisors of the people went out and said to the people, 'Thus says Pharaoh, "I will not give you straw. Go and get straw yourselves, wherever you can find it; but your work will not be lessened in the least"' (Exod 5:10-11). The narrative reports the frantic pace of the slave producers: "So the people scattered throughout the land of Egypt, to gather stubble for straw" (Exod 5:12). And the supervisors reinforce the demand system of production: "The taskmasters were urgent, saying, 'Complete your work, the same daily assignment as when you were given straw'" (Exod 5:13). And then they rebuke

the slaves who find the quotas impossible: "Why did you not finish the required quantity of bricks yesterday and today, as you did before?" (Exod 5:14). The supervisors, who apparently are kinsmen of the slaves, protest against the system of demand: "Then the Israelite supervisors came to Pharaoh and cried, 'Why do you treat your servants like this? No straw is given to your servants, yet they say to us, "Make bricks!" Look how your servants are beaten! You are unjust to your own people'" (Exod 5:15-16). But Pharaoh will have none of their rebuke: "He said, 'You are lazy, lazy; that is why you say, "Let us go and sacrifice to the Lord." Go now, and work; for no straw shall be given you, but you shall still deliver the same number of bricks'" (Exod 5:17-18). And the supervisors reinforce the demands: "The Israelite supervisors saw that they were in trouble when they were told, 'You shall not lessen your daily number of bricks'" (Exod 5:19). The system devours all parties in the rigorous requirements, all parties that include Pharaoh, supervisors, taskmasters, and slaves—all caught up in the system. It is an abuse system in which nobody ever arrives at success. The word for the system is "mistreatment."<sup>4</sup> First, Moses accuses YHWH: "Then Moses turned again to the Lord and said, 'O Lord, why have you *mistreated* this people? Why did you ever send me?'" (Exod 5:22). But then he uses the same phrase for Pharaoh: "Since I first came to Pharaoh to speak in your name, he has *mistreated* this people" (Exod 5:23a). But then he circles back and rebukes YHWH: "And you have done nothing at all to deliver your people" (Exod 5:23b). Moses is the speaker who knows firsthand the destructive force of the devouring, insatiable system; he castigates the system by using the same term of indictment for both YHWH and Pharaoh, "mistreat." The chapter offers a picture perfect narrative of a system of anxiety in which all parties are left restless.

Now of course this system is ancient and remote from us. Except that Michael Walzer has powerfully observed:

So pharaonic oppression, deliverance, Sinai, and Canaan are still with us, powerful memories shaping our perceptions of the political world. The "door of hope" is still open; things are not what they might be—even when what they might be isn't totally different from what they are. This is a central theme in Western thought, always present though elaborated in many different ways. We still believe, or many of us do, what the Exodus first taught, or what it has commonly been taken to teach, about the meaning and possibility of politics and about its proper form:

- first, that wherever you live, it is probably Egypt;
- second, that there is a better place, a world more attractive, a promised land;
- and third, that "the way to the land is through the wilderness." There is no way to get from here to there except by joining together and marching.<sup>5</sup>

Our beginning point is the wonderment of how much *our own anxiety system* is parallel to *that ancient system of anxiety*. Of course I believe that there is a close parallel, because I believe that anxiety about production and consumption is at the heart of our social pathology. I mention three points that would suggest the parallel in quite practical ways:

1. My son Jim, an ace of a sales representative and sales manager, tells me that in the business of sales one never does enough. If one makes the sales quota, one is not thanked or given a bonus or allowed time off. One only gets an increased quota for more bricks!

2. Coach Ara Parseghian of Notre Dame is reported to have said that the "point spread" makes it impossible to be a successful coach. If one can win big and beat the point spread, then the consequence is that the next week one gets a bigger point spread and must win by a bigger margin or it turns out all to be a failure.

3. And along with my son Jim and Coach Parseghian, there is Michael Chertoff, Secretary of Homeland Security, who lives in "a zone of orange" and who invites us to live perpetually in the zone of orange anxiety, the purpose of which seems to be the maintenance of high-level public anxiety, out of which come bizarre policies and equally bizarre behavior. I propose that the production of anxiety in the ancient circumstance of Egypt and our own production of anxiety are carefully analogous. It is not that Pharaoh per se is "bad" but that Pharaoh is a player in the anxiety system, in which there can never be relief. The narrative concerning Pharaoh, moreover, exhibits the truth that the anxiety system eventually commits abuse, brutality, oppression, and violence, as though more destructive policies and practice somehow will bring success. All parties are recruited to the system of anxiety and must act accordingly. The narrative is one of acute social exploitation, and everyone now knows that ours is a society of hostility toward all those unlike us in the pursuit of consumer goods that are taken to make us more successful, younger, richer, more secure . . . more in control. But very soon the pursuit of control produces circumstances in which the entire system is out of control, having taken on a life of its own that is remote from the most elemental human realities.

## II

In Pharaoh's kingdom of *anxiety*, there was no *Sabbath*, not for Pharaoh, not for the supervisors, not for the taskmasters, not for the brick-producing slaves. Everyone had to reach for *more* in a system of insatiable demand. It is for that reason that Sabbath looms so large in the memory and in the practice of Israel. Sabbath is a refusal to participate in the anxiety system of Pharaoh. It is the dramatic insistence that there is life outside the production-consumption system. And if Exodus be properly understood as "departure," a going out, then it is the departure from

the anxiety system of insatiable demand, and a readiness to have life in alternative categories. It is the core claim of my argument here that sustained, public, intentional practice of Sabbath is an act of alternative imagination—outside the imperatives of Pharaoh. It is the practice of an alternative life, alternative to production and consumption. It is a shutdown, work stoppage, of all of the demands that keep life on orange alert, and a readiness to receive and embrace life in alternative categories. In what follows I will outline the principal Old Testament texts on Sabbath and weave them into something of a coherent narrative.

### *Genesis 2:1-3 and Exodus 31:17*

As is well known, the primal authorization of Sabbath is articulated at the end of the creation liturgy in Genesis 1, the conclusion being offered in Genesis 2:1-3:

Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude. And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation. (Gen 2:1-3)

In this recital of beginnings, YHWH had been meticulously at work on an "intelligent design" for six demanding days. During that time, the creator God commanded the other creatures to "be fruitful," that is, to create more of their own kind: "God blessed them, saying, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth'" (Gen 1:22). Terence Fretheim judges that imperative addressed to the creatures to be an invitation to join in the work of creation.<sup>6</sup> And then, as is well known, God created the human couple for governance and management (Gen 1:28). And the concluding verdict, after six days, is "very good" (Gen 1:31). God has variously "said" or "made" or "created," all active verbs.

Nonetheless, the turn to the Sabbath at the end of the liturgy is still something of a surprise. It is usual to say that the goal of the generative work of creation is restfulness. It is usual to say that restful Sabbath is ordained into the fabric of creation. What is not so often said is that God was tired, perhaps exhausted—for generativity is hard work—and had come to the end of God's own energy. That conclusion, moreover, is reinforced by the odd note in Exodus 31:17. In that seldom-read text, God has commanded Moses and Israel for six chapters about the detailed design of the tabernacle, the model for an ordered community. The first six speeches of YHWH in that text concern fabric, design, and workmanship. But the seventh speech, beginning in Exodus 31:12, turns from the design of *space* to purpose for *time*.<sup>7</sup> The seventh speech, not unlike the seventh day of creation, is a command on Sabbath:

The Lord said to Moses: You yourself are to speak to the Israelites: "You shall keep my sabbaths, for this is a sign between me and you throughout your generations, given in order that you may know that I, the Lord, sanctify you. You shall keep the sabbath, because it is holy for you." (Exod 31:12-14)

It is a God-given rule for the human community. The surprise of the text, however, is the final verse of the entire section, in which it is asserted: "It is a sign forever between me and the people of Israel that in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day he rested, and *was refreshed*" (Exod 31:17). God rested and "was refreshed." The verb "refreshed," used only three times in the Old Testament, is from the noun *nephesh*, "self." The verb is in the Niphal, a passive or reflexive verb to be translated either "was refreshed" or "refreshed himself." If we pay attention to the frequently used noun that lies behind the verb, then the verb is best rendered "was re-*nepheshed*" or "re-*nepheshed* himself." Either way, the text suggests that God's *nephesh* had been wearied and diminished by generative work, was depleted, and needed time, space, and freedom from responsibility for the recovery of God's own self. It is the same God in world-making and in tabernacle-making, exhausted and diminished after six days of world-making and six speeches of tabernacle design.

This remarkable liturgical assertion, moreover, is that God desisted from the quintessential work of creation and rested. God exhibits no anxiety about creation, no foreboding about tabernacle design, no sense that the world will not work in God's absence. God has complete confidence in the staying power of creation (or of the tabernacle design) and is not committed to more work, more productivity, more accomplishment. God has no anxiety about the world God has made and knows limits to generative investment.

The text, moreover, has a claim that the human couple in Genesis—and Moses in the book of Exodus—is to replicate God's own life in God's own image. Human persons are to be free of anxiety that propels achievement, productivity, or accomplishment. Human persons, along with the Creator, can trust that the world will work without constant attentiveness. I do not need to point out, do I, that YHWH's life-giving system is a sharp and complete contrast to Pharaoh's brick-making system, in which everyone is propelled by production anxiety? It is a radical either/or. When Moses says to Pharaoh, "Let my people go that they may worship me," the intent is to choose *the rest system of YHWH* over the *anxiety system of Pharaoh*, but Pharaoh cannot relinquish his companions in anxiety.

Now I have discerned that Episcopal priests are not an anxious lot, or so it appears to me, largely unflappable and, I suspect, not workaholics. So I do not need to make that point. The point I do make, however, is that Episcopal priests do minister with many people well-placed on the scale of production-consumption anxiety whose creed is "more," who do not know about the unanxious God in

whose image we are made. Genesis 1-2 is not a story about beginnings. It is a story about an alternative model of reality that has *restfulness* at its center, of refusal to go beyond appropriate generativity in world-making or in creating a "presence" of worth and money.

### *Exodus 20:8-11 and Hosea 4:1-3*

From Genesis 1 and Exodus 31, it is not a far reach to a second text, one you also know well. In Exodus 20:8-11, Israel has arrived at Sinai. Israel has come out from Pharaoh's anxiety system and is fresh from the risk of wilderness, through many "toils and snares." When they arrived at Sinai in Exodus 19, they assented to the commands of YHWH, even before they had heard the commands in chapter 20: "The people all answered as one: 'Everything that the Lord has spoken we will do.' Moses reported the words of the people to the Lord" (Exod 19:8). They consented eagerly, I suppose, because they understood that the commands of the God of liberation and sustenance, whatever those commands might be, would be preferable to the commands of Pharaoh. That is what is happening at Sinai. Israel is changing its life-defining commands, nothing less than "regime change." At Sinai, they got ten; and in the center of the ten is the command on Sabbath:

Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. (Exod 20:8-10)

The text clearly is a reiteration of the Sabbath command in the creation story—or conversely—the creation command is a retrospect on the Sinai command. Either way, Sabbath rest is work stoppage for the entire community—son, daughter, male and female slaves, cattle, and immigrants in your village. The "rest" is comprehensive and systemic. It is, moreover, grounded in creation: "For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and consecrated it" (Exod 20:11). It is "holy," which means it belongs to YHWH and not to Israel. Israel, now having renounced the production-consumption mirage of Pharaoh, is to order its life according to the ordering of creation that is alternative to the craving of anxiety for well-being, more security, more happiness.

These are the "rules for engagement" with the truth of creation that is not negotiable. In this context I call your attention to the remarkable prophetic poem of Hosea 4:1-3 that might, in my judgment, be central to our voicing of "inconvenient truth." In that poem, the prophet offers an "indictment" against Israel. The charge against Israel is:

For the Lord has an indictment  
 against the inhabitants of the land.  
 There is no faithfulness or loyalty,  
 and no knowledge of God in the land.  
 Swearing, lying, and murder,  
 and stealing and adultery break out;  
 bloodshed follows bloodshed. (Hos 4:1-2)

This catalog of offenses is surely reminiscent of the Decalogue, even though the Sabbath is not explicitly mentioned. Israel here has violated all the commands of Sinai; that puts it at odds with the nonnegotiable ordering of creation.

And then, in a characteristically daring prophetic move, Hosea says "therefore." That term, in prophetic discourse, regularly connects indictment and sentence, choice and consequence:

*Therefore* the land mourns,  
 and all who live in it languish;  
 together with the wild animals  
 and the birds of the air,  
 even the fish of the sea are perishing. (Hos 4:3)

The phrase "land mourns" in Old Testament poetry means "drought." The drought is so severe that creatureliness across the board is under threat. This statement is a direct allusion to the creation story and anticipates the dismantling and failure of the fabric of creation. *The violation of the Sinai commands* has put Israel out of sync with the character of creation so that Israel's misconduct *places creation in jeopardy*. Now, I understand that we can reduce this prophetic connection to simplistic moralism or to primitive supernaturalism. But we need do neither. We may take the poetic artistry as a discernment that a society ordered against the fabric of creation (and the will of the Creator) will lose its world. And the center of the fabric of creation is Sabbath rest, an alternative to the anxiety of production and consumption. Serious Sabbath is not just for a good weekend; it is a nonnegotiable condition for viable life in the world. When societies encroach on the day of rest, creation begins to unravel, personally, socially, and cosmically.

### *Deuteronomy*

When Israel arrived at the Jordan River ready to enter the land of promise, Moses stopped at the river and, in the book of Deuteronomy, for thirty chapters he teaches and instructs Israel about their life in the new land. The burden of Moses' instruction in the book of Deuteronomy has, I suggest, two convictions, one negative and one positive. The negative conviction is that, if Israel is not alert about

its identity and its vocation as the people of the covenant, it will be seduced by Canaanite practices and forfeit its life in the world. It is for that reason that Moses reiterates the imperative, "Take heed, watch out," or you will lose your way. The warning, cast in religious cadences, is against the gods of Canaan. But the religious claim is inescapably a warning against Canaanite socioeconomic practices of greed and acquisitiveness that were sustained by the Canaanite religion. What used to be called "Canaanite fertility religion" is an effort at can-do, self-help notions that by actions of acquisitiveness inhabitants of the land can secure their own future. This notion is a direct threat to Israel, for Moses reminds Israel that all is a gift and not an achievement:

When the LORD your God has brought you into the land that he swore to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give you—a land with fine, large cities that you did not build, houses filled with all sorts of goods that you did not fill, hewn cisterns that you did not hew, vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant—and when you have eaten your fill, take care that you do not forget the LORD, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. The LORD your God you shall fear; him you shall serve, and by his name alone you shall swear. Do not follow other gods, any of the gods of the peoples who are all around you, because the LORD your God, who is present with you, is a jealous God. The anger of the LORD your God would be kindled against you and he would destroy you from the face of the earth. (Deut 6:10-15)

For the LORD your God is bringing you into a good land, a land with flowing streams, with springs and underground waters welling up in valleys and hills, a land of wheat and honey, a land where you may eat bread without scarcity, where you will lack nothing, a land whose stones are iron and from whose hills you may mine copper. You shall eat your fill and bless the LORD your God for the good land that he has given you.

Take care that you do not forget the LORD your God, by failing to keep his commandments, his ordinances, and his statutes, which I am commanding you today. When you have eaten your fill and have built fine houses and live in them, and when your herds and flocks have multiplied, and your silver and gold is multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied, then do not exalt yourself, forgetting the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, who led you through the great and terrible wilderness, an arid wasteland with poisonous snakes and scorpions. He made water flow for you from flint rock, and fed you in the wilderness with manna that your ancestors did not know, to humble you and to test you, and in the end to do you good. Do not say to yourself, "My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth." (Deut 8:7-17)

The positive counterpoint to the warning against seduction is the conviction that the land of Canaan is transformable, so that its political economy can be altered and turned into a covenantal neighborhood. That conviction would seem to be the point of the preached torah in the book of Deuteronomy. Israel's insistent obedience to covenantal torah will fundamentally alter the social relationships of the community. It is for that reason that current scholarship refers to Deuteronomy as a "constitution" for an alternative polity in the land of Canaan.<sup>8</sup>

The *warning about seduction* and the *possibility of transformation* are explicated in the book of Deuteronomy by interpretation of the torah of Sinai. I will mention two aspects of that exposition in terms of our subject of Sabbath. First, in Deuteronomy 5:6-21, Moses reiterates the Ten Commandments of Exodus 20. As is well known, this is, except for slight editorial variation, a full and faithful reiteration of the words of Sinai. But as is equally well known, the one substantive variation is in the Sabbath command of Deuteronomy 5:12-15. Again, the commandment is a provision for work stoppage in all parts of the community:

Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy, as the LORD your God commanded you. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work—you, or your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock, or the resident alien in your towns, so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you. (Deut 5:12-14)

The most interesting point here is that Moses adds a phrase that does not occur in the Exodus version, "like you" ("as well as you" in the NRSV's translation above). In this rendition Sabbath is the moment of radical social equality in which master and slave, father and son and daughter, livestock and oxen are all equal because none is performing, none is proving anything. Everyone knows that in the rough-and-tumble world of production not all are equal because some are more able, more competitive, more skillful, more motivated; and so they produce more and are awarded accordingly. Everyone knows that in the competitive world of consumption, some have more than others. They are reckoned to be more entitled than others and exercise greater leverage and advantage in the accumulation of goods. But Sabbath is a sabbatical from the rough-and-tumble world of production, from the competitive leverage of consumption, because all, the nonproductive and the nonentitled, are to rest and be treated as a neighbor, just as you are. Such a claim may be inferred at Sinai; here in Deuteronomy it is explicit.

What may interest us more, however, is the motivation offered at the Jordan by Moses for the Sabbath command: "Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to

keep the sabbath day" (Exod 5:15). Here there is no mention of creation and six days of creation. Here there is no reference to the fabric of creation or the unanxious presence of the Creator. In Deuteronomy the matter is more acute and more concrete. It is about Pharaoh and Egypt and exodus deliverance, emancipation from the brutal production-consumption apparatus of Pharaoh, who is reckoned in Israel as the icon of antilife. Sabbath is alternative to Pharaoh. Work stoppage is an alternative to unreachable brick quotas. Rest is a counter to the complexity that is endemic to the pharaonic system. Israel is to rest as a public statement that life does not consist in the compulsions of production or consumption. It may be seen, then, that the Sabbath commandment is the middle term and the connection between the first commandment, on *false gods*, and the tenth commandment, on *compulsive acquisitiveness*, that Moses takes to be rooted in the attractive power of the gods of Egypt and Canaan. At the center of the Deuteronomic Decalogue is the insistence that if Israel is to *resist seduction* and if Israel is to *enact a transformative alternative*, then the key and starting point is the refusal of the commoditization of life in order to make room for social relationships that are not so ordered in coercion.

Second, it is the view of some scholars that the Torah corpus in Deuteronomy 12-25 is in fact an ordered exposition of the Decalogue, so that the Torah commandments that appear to be miscellaneous and ad hoc in fact are sequenced according to the Ten Commandments.<sup>9</sup> I do not know if that case is compelling, but it has heuristic value in any case. If we entertain that option and look to see where the Sabbath commandment is explicated in the more extended corpus, we will conclude that it shows up in the commandment on the "year of release" in Deuteronomy 15:1-18. The "year of release" is the Sabbath writ large and made concrete in the political imagination of Israel.

This statute, extended by a great deal of didactic material, provides that debt held by creditors in the community must not be extended beyond six years. This commandment, plus its exposition, is likely the fount of all thinking about *forgiveness* in the Bible. Forgiveness has to do with the overcoming of indebtedness, whereby the economy is subordinated to neighborly relationships and is pressed into the service of healthy social relationships.<sup>10</sup> The commandment itself is terse in verses 1-3 and only provides and asserts that the requirement pertains only to neighbors in the community of covenant and not to outsiders. What is particularly interesting is the extended exposition that pertains to the poor or, as the NRSV prefers, "the needy." I will mention five aspects of the exposition of Sabbath, but we are already into fresh territory by connecting Sabbath to the economy of the poor whereby rest is understood as a neighborly curb on social practices of acquisitiveness.

1. The Sabbath is linked to the needy. In verse 11, a text quoted by Jesus (Matt 26:11; Mark 14:7), Moses affirms that there will always be poor people, and so the commandment must be kept: "Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, 'Open your hand to the poor

and needy neighbor in your land'” (Deut 15:11). Clearly the statement is a motivation for obedience and is not to be taken cynically, as now often happens, to imagine that nothing can be done. On the other hand, in verse 4, the cruciality and effectiveness of the command are asserted: “There will, however, be no one in need among you, because the LORD is sure to bless you in the land that the Lord your God is giving you as a possession to occupy” (Deut 15:4). The year of release makes it possible that there need be no poor in the community, certainly not an underclass. Thus Moses imagines a radical covenantal act of sabbathing that transforms social relationships.

2. It is clear that the teaching of Moses met with resistance from those who saw no reason to curb acquisitiveness, that is, who wished to replicate Pharaoh in terms of production and control. Moses acknowledges a propensity toward pharaonic practice that had been alive in Israel from the beginning:

If there is among you anyone in need, a member of your community in any of your towns within the land that the LORD your God is giving you, do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbor. . . . Be careful that you do not entertain a mean thought, thinking, “The seventh year, the year of remission, is near,” and therefore view your needy neighbor with hostility and give nothing; your neighbor might cry to the LORD against you, and you would incur guilt. (Deut 15:7, 9)

Moses takes this resistance and refusal to be a dangerous practice for the community because it will evoke “a cry,” the same cry that the slaves voiced to YHWH in Egypt.

3. Moses mobilizes his most urgent rhetoric of imperative concerning this commandment, more than any other in the corpus of Deuteronomy. Five times Moses employs *the absolute infinitive*, a peculiar grammatical construction in Hebrew that intensifies a verb by its reiteration. This usage is not visible in English translation, but we can, even in the English translation, notice the urgency of the rhetoric:

- diligently observing (v. 5);
- opening your hand (v. 8);
- willingly lending (v. 8);
- giving liberally (v. 10);
- providing liberally (v. 14).

The imperatives are the most elemental urging toward covenant, for it is in the treatment of the needy that Israel is most Israel. And it is in Sabbath disengagement from production and consumption that Israel most evidences its peculiar covenantal character.

4. The motivation for this elemental requirement is the same as that given in Deuteronomy 5 for the Sabbath: “Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God redeemed you; for this reason I lay this command upon you today” (Deut 15:15). It is clear that Sabbath and the derivative practice of debt cancellation are militantly anti-Pharaoh. And, of course, the same conviction is insisted on for the even more extravagant imagination of the jubilee year in Leviticus 25:

I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, to give you the land of Canaan, to be your God. . . . For they are my servants, whom I brought out of the land of Egypt; they shall not be sold as slaves are sold. . . . For to me the people of Israel are servants; they are my servants whom I brought out from the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God. (Lev 25:38, 42, 55)

5. Moses adds a final rhetorical flourish, asserting that the practice of the year of release also has practical implications: “Do not consider it a hardship when you send them out from you free persons, because for six years they have given you services worth the wages of hired laborers; and the Lord your God will bless you in all that you do” (Deut 15:18). The promise of a “blessing” draws the exposition of Moses back into the sphere of creation, for “blessing” refers to the good, productive world of creation and the bearing of much economic fruit. This statement represents a modest departure from the exodus theme in order to insist that such an economic practice that is exodus-shaped brings the community into sync with creation. Such an economy that is not exploitative or acquisitive will work better because the earth yields its gifts to a neighborly society.<sup>11</sup>

It is worth noting that, in the ordering of Deuteronomy, this extended instruction is followed in Deuteronomy 15:19-22 and 16:1-17 by provisions for sacrificial offerings and celebration of festivals, each act a glad performance of gratitude for the goodness of life granted by the God of the exodus.

### *Exodus 16*

If the Sabbath commandment constitutes resistance and alternative to Pharaoh, and if we work backward from the commandment of Sinai (and Deuteronomy) to Pharaoh, we will again come to Exodus 16 as an important way station, whether we read forward from Pharaoh to Sinai or backward from Sinai to Pharaoh. Either way, we have noticed the narrative of bread from heaven that was freely given in abundance, with only one imperative attached: “And Moses said to them, ‘Let no one leave any of it over until morning’” (Exod 16:19). That is all. Bread cannot be stored. It cannot be accumulated. It cannot be carried over until the next day. That provision perforce limits the amount of bread to be gathered to be sure that



your eyes are not bigger than your stomach and that your grasping hands do not overreach. Sufficient for the day is the bread thereof! For that reason we are profoundly taken by surprise when Moses adds the next statement:

He said to them, "This is what the Lord has commanded: 'Tomorrow is a day of solemn rest, a holy sabbath to the Lord; bake what you want to bake and boil what you want to boil, and all that is left over put aside to be kept until morning.'" So they put it aside until morning, as Moses commanded them; and it did not become foul, and there were no worms in it. (Exod 16:23-24)

In this statement Moses violates his own rule just uttered about bread for the day. Moses makes an exception for Sabbath, because Sabbath is an exceptional day in Israel. The test case is that they tried it. The bread acted differently on the seventh day. It did not become foul; there were no worms in it. And Moses issues his concluding command: "Moses said, 'Eat it today, for today is a sabbath to the Lord; today you will not find it in the field. Six days you shall gather it; but on the seventh day, which is a sabbath, there will be none'" (Exod 16:25-26). Bread will not be given on the seventh day—because the Creator is at rest. There will be none! Earth rests because heaven does not grant the commodities that would evoke work.

Likely too much should not be made of this little paragraph, terse as it is. But what an utterance, what a prohibition, what an assurance! Even in the wilderness, the place without viable life support, Sabbath will be kept. Israel will enact its antipharaonic identity, and Israel will see that even in this place bereft of life support, sustenance is given. Israel did not need to violate its identity, even in a place of deepest deficiency.

#### *Amos 8:4-6*

It is remarkable that, after this accent on Sabbath in Sinai Torah provisions, the prophetic corpus of the Old Testament makes few references to it. Perhaps it makes few references because it was so ingrained in Israel that it did not need to be reiterated or because it was overrun by bigger issues or because on historical-critical grounds Sabbath was not yet established in Israel. In any case, I cite one of the few Sabbath texts in the prophetic corpus, one that seems to me to be peculiarly pertinent in its urgency, Amos 8:4-6. The poem begins with a rather generic indictment:

Hear this, you that trample on the needy,  
and bring to ruin the poor of the land. (Amos 8:4)

The indictment concerns economic exploitation of the poor, a standard theme of Amos. The economic exploitation is, in Old Testament horizon, an imitation of

Pharaoh and an embrace of Canaanite practice. In verse 5, Amos gets specific; he does so by putting in the mouth of his adversaries all of the material of verses 5-6 with a "you say":

- You say:

When will the new moon be over  
so that we may sell grain? (Amos 8:5a)

You wonder how long the festival service will last. You look at your watch, you fidget, and you wonder how long you have to stay in the meeting, the "new moon" that comes once a month, the Sabbath that occurs every week. You endure the discipline of it all, but you already are making notes for what comes next.

- You say:

... so that we may offer wheat for sale? (Amos 8:5b)

When can we get back to the market? When can we reengage the economy from which we have taken a break, an enforced break? When can we get back to the normal processes of dishonest measures and rigged scales?

- You say:

... buying the poor for silver  
and the needy for a pair of sandals,  
and selling the sweepings of the wheat. (Amos 8:6)

When can we get back to exploitation of the poor, through high interest rates, exploitative prices, poor goods, because they do not know their value and do not care?

Amos posits a profound contradiction between pious practice and compulsive intention,<sup>12</sup> sketching out double-mindedness in which the pursuit of commodity has crowded in on the quintessence of Israelite reality, so that even in the moment of Israelite rest, energy is given to pharaonic commoditization. (I know about making notes in church for the next thing that comes along, though I have not yet had my own cell phone ring during a worship service.)

It strikes me that what Amos describes is multitasking, the contemporary agile capacity to do more than one thing at a time, to rest or to worship, but to maximize the time by doing more, doing more in order to get ahead, having an advantage,

improving one's life. I submit that *multitasking* may be the visible enactment of *anti-Sabbath*; I could imagine Pharaoh in Egyptian liturgy engaging in text messaging to see how the production of bricks goes—no Sabbath rest! And then I thought of the ultimate teaching of Jesus on multitasking: “No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth” (Matt 6:24). However the last word is rendered—mammon, wealth, capital—it is a telling counterpoint to God, to the God of the exodus. It is no wonder that at its very beginning in Deuteronomy Moses had summoned Israel: “Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might” (Deut 6:4-5). Moses urges an undivided God and an undivided Israel in alliance with God—one heart, one mind, one will, one relationship, one act of loyalty, one practice of imagination. Could it be that multitasking with juggled loyalties bespeaks our primal restlessness and militates against exodus emancipation and the assurances of creation? If one thinks about multitasking and single-mindedness, it is of interest to me that on CNN and such news channels one gets scrolling updates at the bottom of the screen with the news so that we may multitask—but none during the ads! The advertisers invite single-mindedness and do not want divided attention or a contradiction to the demands of Pharaoh and all other anxious, self-securing systems.

### III

All of this thus far might be obvious and well known to you. I have taken so long with it for two reasons. First, I believe that Sabbath-defying anxiety is at the heart of our social pathology and that this Sabbath-defying anxiety is the primal datum in the horizon of an early Christian trajectory of faith. I have made the surface exploration through an old book by Philip Carrington who, in the book, is identified only as “Bishop of Quebec.”<sup>13</sup> His study concerns these sets of either/or counsel, which he situates in the practice of baptism, whereby the candidate for baptism embraced a very different life in the world.

Carrington suggests that the evidence of the New Testament epistles reflects a fourfold formulation familiar to us in the cadences of the baptismal liturgy and that must have been, according to Carrington, a recurring liturgical usage:

#### 1. Put off all evil:

Rid yourselves, therefore, of all malice, and all guile, insincerity, envy, and all slander. (1 Pet 2:1)

Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls. (Jas 1:21)

#### 2. Be in subjection (a code of subordination):

For the Lord's sake accept the authority of every human institution, whether of the emperor as supreme, or of governors, as sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to praise those who do right. (1 Pet 2:13-14)

Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. (Jas 4:7)

#### 3. Be vigilant:

The end of all things is near; therefore be serious and discipline yourselves for the sake of your prayers. (1 Pet 4:7)

Devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it with thanksgiving. (Col 4:2)

#### 4. Be in resistance:

Discipline yourselves, keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour. (1 Pet 5:8-9)

Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. (Jas 4:7)

The sum of these imperatives is to urge active intentionality, as everything is at stake in being disciplined and single-minded. The urgency is not because of a small, calculating moralism but because the world is under threat from the power of evil that would override faith and undo humanness.

The fourfold formulation of Carrington amounts to an either/or decision of resistance and affirmation that Paul lines out in terms of “flesh and spirit.” I am aware that it is easiest to read Paul's radical either/or in terms of ontological realities. But when read in Old Testament perspective, a perspective that is characteristically dramatic, political, and socioeconomic, the bid for resistance and affirmation sounds exactly like that of Moses in Deuteronomy concerning rejection of Canaanite modes of life and embrace of neighborly covenant.

Given this family resemblance, I read the Pauline either/or of “flesh and spirit” as the antithesis of *pharaonic, Sabbathless society* and a *neighborly, Sabbath-grounded alternative*.

I do so by asking about what a restless acquisitiveness may do, and I suggest that such acquisitiveness may produce people who are anxious, fearful, aggressive, mean-spirited, self-indulgent, and selfish. My thought is that such modes of participation in society are not accidental or incidentally chosen. They are, rather,

the predictable results of a systemic ordering of social relationships around insatiable production and equally insatiable consumption. Thus, I read the "fruits" of Sabbathless society:

Now *the works of the flesh* are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. (Gal 5:19-21)

They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of their ignorance and hardness of heart. They have lost all sensitivity and have abandoned themselves to licentiousness, greedy to practice every kind of impurity. . . . Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice. (Eph 4:18-19, 31)

Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry). On account of these the wrath of God is coming on those who are disobedient. These are the ways you also once followed, when you were living that life. But now you must get rid of all such things—anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices. (Col 3:5-9)

The sum of these lists constitutes the horizon and the practice of destructive human conduct that makes human community impossible.

By contrast, Paul commands the fruit of the spirit:

By contrast, *the fruit of the Spirit* is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, competing against one another, envying one another. (Gal 5:22-26)

Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. . . . And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you. Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. (Eph 4:29, 32; 5:1)

. . . and [you] have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator. In that

renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!

As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. (Col 3:10-15)

Here is offered a portrayal of a community in which its members are predisposed to the habits of neighborliness.

In the early church, the drama of baptism was a life or death matter that required resistance and fresh embrace. If we read back from Paul (by way of Carington), we dare imagine that the drama of exodus-Sinai is likewise a repeated liturgical performance of departure and arrival. In that ancient drama, it is a move,

- from a Sabbathless society of anxiety,
- to a wish for bread with enough given for Sabbath in the wilderness,
- to a set of commands that connect idolatry to covetousness and refuses both.

#### IV

I conclude this exercise with the conviction that such *systemic anxiety* no doubt feeds the war effort, feeds the crisis of gays and lesbians, feeds the loudness about immigration. The body politic is restless and, because Sabbathless, is devoured by the urgency of control that is willing to violate neighbor and to violate the Constitution.

In that matrix that seethes with fear and resentment, the community of covenant bespeaks an urgent alternative. That unanxious alternative concerns genuine social relationships that can be neighborly. That unanxious alternative, I believe, depends on a centered restfulness that does not perceive others as threats or as competitors but as brothers, sisters, and neighbors. I believe, and have found it true for myself, however, that such neighborly possibility depends on some intentional disengagement from the pursuit of money, control, and power. I have, moreover, the conviction that the best strategy for slowing down the motor of anxiety is precisely the willful performance of Sabbath.

I understand that Episcopalians have never entertained the thought of becoming Mennonites, and neither have Calvinists! But the Mennonite discipline of disengagement is likely urgent for our time and place—not in order to remain withdrawn, as Mennonites do not—but to reengage with a buoyant, unintimidated

spirit. The church, in its practice of baptism—performance, remembrance, and “improving”—is the practice of disengagement from Sabbathless existence that leaves us fractured and exhausted and short of our best selves. In parallel fashion, Israel’s departure from Egypt through wilderness to Torah is not a one-time memory but a frequently reenacted decision.

Paul has the right language:

For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. (Gal 5:1)

So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. (Eph 4:25)

... and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator. In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all! (Col 3:10-11)

We have been at this forever. It is my thought that Moses might be a larger pattern in this enterprise, even as he placed the Sabbath command at the center of the Decalogue, a barrier against the commoditization of neighbor and of self.

## CHAPTER 4

# The Countercommands of Sinai

THE NEWS WE CONFESS together is that God has loved the world, us as creatures in the world, and all of our neighbors, human creatures and all other creatures.<sup>1</sup> The reason this is news is that there is deeply rooted in creation a contradiction of that love that makes the news a scandal. And yet we cling to that news against the evidence of contradiction. As we cling to the news, we are left with all the ethical questions of attitude, behavior, and policy that are demanding, elusive, and complex. Of course, none of that is new, as we have been at this issue of response to the gospel for the sake of the world at least since the Second Isaiah and his self-conscious use of the term “gospel.” And even that poet had his antecedents in gospel response. But the question is fresh for us, as it always is, because our faith is always as new and urgent as the most recent shape of the world and our existence within it. To pose the question as the planning committee has done invites us to venture afresh as we ask about “response to the gospel for the sake of the world.”

### I

I am willing to take a try at that fresh venture that is bound to be vexatious and contentious. But as I do so, I am aware of three impediments that I face:

The first impediment in this company is that I am not good at “Lutheran.” I have old Lutheran genes in my body and no less than Kathleen Norris has labeled me as a Lutheran. I am a child of *Kirchenverein des Westes*, the Evangelical Church Fellowship of the West that was a transport from the Prussian Union of 1817. In that moment of German history, the king of Prussia forced Lutherans and Calvinists into the same church, weary as he was of their eucharistic quarrels. In my seminary