

Devotion for Week of August 28, 2022

Rev. Jeanne Simpson

In a few short weeks the PW will begin studying Celebrating Sabbath, by Carol Bechtel. That title may be somewhat puzzling to those of us who grew up in households where we “observed Sabbath” (and kept it holy). Celebrating didn’t make a lot of sense when you couldn’t play outside, play games or cards inside, or do much besides go to church and visit with the kinfolk. But Bechtel brings us back to the idea that the Sabbath is a “blessing, not a burden,” and we should celebrate that seventh day of the week, when we not only rest, but we have a party!

In James Michener’s classic book about Israel, The Source, Rabbi Zaki runs up and down the streets of Jerusalem in joy early on Friday evenings, telling everyone that “your Bride is coming!” And of course, the Bride is Sabbath, or Shabbat, as it is called in Hebrew. As dusk begins to fall, the Jews are told to come out of their houses and greet this wonderful gift from God – 24 hours of rest and worship. So they turn to the west as the sun goes down, and say “Come Shabbat, come!” Jesus called himself “Lord of the Sabbath,” and Bechtel says that what he was trying to teach is that Sabbath is more about saying “yes” than saying “no.”

Although Sabbath literally means “stop,” many Jews have two celebrations: as they begin Sabbath on Friday evening, they light candles, say prayers, and have a large meal with the entire family. After the mother lights two candles (one each for the Exodus and Deuteronomy versions of the Commandment to keep the Sabbath) and the first prayer is said welcoming the Sabbath into the home, the father comes and stands beside the mother, and the children come and stand with them. The parents put their hands on each child’s head, pray for the child, and bless the child using the Numbers 6 blessing:

“May God bless you and keep you. May God show you favor and be gracious to you. May God show you kindness and grant your peace.”

At the end of Sabbath right before sundown on Saturday, there is a Sabbath “leave-taking,” where participants pass around a box of fragrant spices (typically cinnamon and cloves) as they remember the sweetness of the Sabbath that is passing. Then participants turn to each other and say, “Have a good week” - not as just a passing comment, but as a prayer that the Sabbath’s peace and blessing will extend into the week ahead.

Jeanne