Beyond the Howl of Coyotes: Reflections on a Good Sabbatical

by

Rev. William G. Carter
Pastor and Head of Staff
First Presbyterian Church of Clarks Summit
Clarks Summit, PA

A fierce wind blew through a canyon of red rocks. Fresh from a worship service in a desert monastery, I heard a new sound in the dusk. A nearby coyote howled and the cry chilled me to the bone. Something in that animal’s yearning echoed my own – but what was it?

Was it a cry of hunger for a meal – or for something more satisfying? Was it the creature’s proclaiming its existence to an indifferent wilderness? Was it a mating call, desiring deep relationship and the hope for a future? Was this a confession of loneliness? Or was it a conditioned response that every coyote makes?

I stood my ground and listened as the coyote cried out again. The prayers of Compline, the final worship service of the day, still rang through the canyon. Our cloistered community had concluded the day by praying for God to grant each of us “a peaceful death.” It was not clear if the coyote’s call was a defiant resistance to that prayer or an echo of its deep hope.
This was an early moment in my first pastoral sabbatical. As the coyote howled offstage in the New Mexico landscape, I reflected on the journey that led me to stand in those crimson shadows. It was a journey of paradox: I would draw on the spiritual traditions of the Christian church for my renewal, even though my service to the church was depleting my energy and imagination. In my imagination, the coyotes rarely took a night off.

**The Sabbatical Dream**

The dream of a sabbatical began in weariness. After sixteen years in my parish with no more than two weeks off in a row, I wanted some time to rest, receive, and create. I developed a project around the Psalms, deciding to study and pray them, absorb their vocabulary, and explore a way to participate in them artistically. The plan suggested the intentional visit to communities where the psalms are taken seriously. With a bit of excitement, I focused the list to two specific sites: a Benedictine monastery where the entire Psalter is chanted each week and a Free Church congregation in Scotland where unaccompanied psalm singing is the only form of congregational music.

The sabbatical also involved some “compost time” in a nearby mountain retreat when I could excavate the ferment of over twenty years of ministry. I would journal my thoughts and memories. As my own creative response to the Psalter, I sensed a call to compose some instrumental jazz music that I would entitle “psalms without words” as a way of exploring music as a form of prayer.

A focused project created fresh energy long before the sabbatical ever began. When I settled on the Psalms as the primary text for my extended Sabbath, the decision began to energize my imagination. Book titles started leaping off the pages of catalogs. Friends suggested resources that might be helpful. I began to catch up on recent scholarly conversations about the psalms, and began to listen to as many musical settings of the psalms as I could find.

Part of my sabbatical aim was to begin a new habit of receiving scripture and not merely dispensing it. The weekly rhythm of preparing sermons can lull clergy like me into an unnecessary arrogance. We take ordination vows that declare scripture as a Word from God to us, but we find ourselves more frequently as God’s advertisers, doing whatever we can to make the weekly sales pitch, seeking out fresh material while we read novels or watch movies. There is the chronic demand to say something meaningful each time we open our mouths, even if we are bored with our own voices. The spigot stays open even if the well runs dry.

The situation for clergy is complicated by their role within communities of faith. Clergy can become minor celebrities in their communities, never significant
enough to make the cover of magazines, but frequently viewed with amplified attention and scrutiny. It helps to counter years of standing in a slightly spotlighted pulpit with seasons of anonymity, if only to puncture the illusion of one’s own importance. Time out of the spotlight can scrub us clean from others’ opinions about our work, our habits, and our children.

It was time for a sabbatical. I needed a season for recalibrating my soul.

**The Blessing of a Sabbatical Grant**

Thanks to the generosity of the Louisville Institute, I received a sabbatical grant to fund my explorations. The Institute wisely required a consultation with all grantees. It was extremely helpful. Colleagues were gathered for important conversations about tangible issues, from the ethics of leave-taking to financial concerns. In small groups, the grant recipients discussed specific issues about leaving behind our work and negotiating family expectations.

We also shared our hopes for our sabbaticals: how we planned to spend the time, where (if anywhere) we expected to go. The wide creative range of other grant recipients was remarkable, and my world was enlarged by simply listening to what the Holy Spirit was prompting in my colleagues. As we chatted, we found ourselves enriched by one another’s imaginative approaches to spiritual replenishment.

The greatest from the consultation, however, was one of blessing. On behalf of the wider church, the Louisville Institute blessed my intention to pursue a balanced and grounded ministry. Somebody beyond my zip code was speaking up to say, “Good for you!” – and then backing it up with grant funding. For many ministers, even the most supportive congregation can seem a harsh mistress who chastises them for using all their vacation time and “guilts” them back into mediocrity.

By contrast, the Institute was setting me free to pursue the call of the Spirit. This was a profound gift for which I continue to be grateful.

**Preparing to Go**

Back home, my congregation had mixed feelings about my plans. My initial request for the sabbatical was met with silence, then growing curiosity. A few people were outwardly resistant, personalizing the issue and pointing out that their jobs did not allow for such time off. They rolled their eyes and made stupid jokes about the “one hour a week” workload. Yet this minority opinion was quickly trumped by those who worked with me each week. They claimed that I had not lost my creative edge, but they were concerned that it might become
dulled. As is the usual case in the parish, the large majority of people were located somewhere between the extremes. They were supportive of me and of my plans. Many had not realized that I had been their pastor for sixteen years and I took that to be a good sign.

As a small leadership team worked with me to explore possible dates, we were surprised by the unexpected news that our longtime associate pastor would be retiring soon. This unanticipated announcement shook up the congregation, and the news prompted us to postpone the sabbatical for a year. When church members heard my colleague was leaving, they were afraid that my sabbatical signaled that I would also leave them. So our leadership team took the necessary time to first deal with her departure.

This decision had the unexpected benefit of providing a year for my sabbatical intentions to sink in. In that time of transition, I had a two month stretch when I conducted nine funerals in our mid-sized congregation. The grief work belonged to the whole church family, and it provided an opportunity to talk openly about mutual fears regarding my departure. At the same time, my work load was even more obvious to everybody and many were ready to bless me on a journey of self-care.

As much as possible, all the sabbatical plans were done long in advance. Six months before my departure, our elders had helped me establish a sabbatical planning team. It consisted of two highly respected church members, two seasoned ministers from our presbytery, and our interim associate pastor who would be acting head of staff in my absence. We relied on helpful materials from the Alban Institute to map out what would happen during my time away. We were very intentional about advance communication, first getting the governing board’s buy-in for my project, and then spreading official word through the congregation.

In the months preceding my departure, I set up an Internet blog to communicate my plans, fears, and hopes. The blog was a great help, and it built some positive interest among those church members who were curious about my plans. As the sabbatical began, it was also a good way to mark my time and travels. I could report and post pictures from a distance as I moved through my sabbatical journey.

Expecting Resistance

Any clear plan in ministry should expect and plan for obstacles. A sabbatical is no different. In addition to the process of dealing with congregational resistance which every pastor comes to expect, I discerned the questions that swirled through my soul. Did I really deserve this? Was a sabbatical merely an exercise
in self-indulgence? Should I simply suck it up, be strong, and settle for using all my annual vacation time? Like many clergy, I negated the importance of my own care. It took three years for me to muster the courage to make my request to take this time. Along the way, every critical or inquiring word from others was amplified by my own self-doubt.

What helped was a growing sense that God was calling me into a period of Holy Sabbath. Along with the official blessing of the Louisville Institute, the external affirmation that I had won a grant, and the support of my congregation’s governing body, there was the deep tug of the Holy Spirit. I knew very clearly that God wanted my complete attention for a while – and I needed to honor that voice before all others.

I scheduled a week of vacation before my eight-week sabbatical. This was a decision generally lost on my congregation, but crucially important for me in beginning to shift gears. I needed time to settle down into a new pace. Shortly into that first week, I was hospitalized overnight with chest pains. Fortunately it was only a wake-up call with no lasting health issues – but it got my attention. My physician declared this was the value of the episode. The accumulated stress of parish life was greater than I had realized, and my body was reporting how much the stress had affected me. All the more reason, he announced, to take the time to unplug from ceaseless labor and find healthier ways to work.

Once the sabbatical began there were other obstacles, mostly surmountable. There was one night of living hell as I dealt with the incompetence of airlines and the indifference of hotel clerks, not a new story for anybody who travels. Let us remember that we are not replenished by a breathless itinerary, prone to flight delays, hidden fees, and border hassles. When it comes to Sabbath time, it is far wiser to find a restorative location and put down roots.

For those of us with families, the sabbatical can be a significant complication. At the beginning of my time away, I wanted to spend intentional time with those in my household. Yet the negotiations with a busy family before the sabbatical were in many ways more work than the negotiations with my church. And yet, during the sabbatical I was able to find time to spend with each person of my household. We could look eye to eye without the interruption of a hospital call or a church meeting. This deepened my love for each of them.

One particular complication for my sabbatical was the fact that I am a divorced and remarried parent of teenagers. That meant I had to alter long established parenting schedules with my former wife. It took a lot of time up front to arrange the calendars, especially since my kids have busy schedules of their own. I can understand why some ministers might put off sabbatical planning until the nest is
Another challenge was that the sabbatical granted me a larger chunk of down time than anybody else in the house received. Any resentment about that truth had to be worked through. It was a blessing to negotiate with my wife’s employer some time away without pay, allowing us to take one significant trip together.

Counting the Blessings

The sabbatical journey was one of the most significant events in my long ministry. I prayed the entire Psalter with a community of Benedictines at the Christ in the Desert monastic community of New Mexico, surrounded by silence, and internally strengthened to refute the coyotes. A pilgrimage to Scotland took me and my wife to sing the Psalms in Gaelic with the austere Presbyterians in the town of Stornoway. There was ample time to nap, and significant periods of time for “floating” like a feather on the wind of the Spirit.

I learned to scale back my driven expectations of myself. The impressive reading list of significant books was whittled down to a few important works to read deeply. I welcomed some spaciousness in each day, and took off my wristwatch for good. These were significant moves for an overachieving, first-born child who is prone to self-importance.

The benefits of this intentional time began to multiply. I re-learned the ability to pray. As I immersed myself in the Psalter, I had the profound sense that the prayers and hymns of Israel offer a gift of vocabulary. When my own prayers come up short on words, my most profound pastoral discovery was that there is already a collection of prayers for the faithful in the middle of our Bibles. This simple discovery was deeply transforming. I grew up with my favorite Psalms, of course, but had not experienced the broad array of texts that explore “the anatomy of the soul” (John Calvin). It was clear also that praying Psalms needed to become my life’s work and my pastoral invitation to others.

The unscheduled and spacious nature of my time had another benefit. I slowed down enough to start paying attention to the quiet works of grace, both in others and in myself. Early on, I read a wonderful book by Esther De Waal that I had purchased on a whim: Lost in Wonder: Rediscovering the Spiritual Art of Attentiveness (Liturgical Press, 2003). Her insights shaped the way that I moved through the sabbatical.

Another wise companion also entered my journey at one significant juncture. A chance conversation with a friend led me to explore Belden Lane’s powerful book, The Solace of Fierce Landscapes (Oxford University Press, 1998). Lane’s weaving of personal narrative, spiritual tradition, and the wisdom of the Desert
Fathers was a powerful guide for my journey. I felt pushed to give up the narcissistic notion that God existed purely for my benefit. This was an important move for a Baby Boomer to make in midlife. It helped to repel a few more of the coyotes that circled around.

Another benefit was the time to make new art for the church. I am a jazz pianist and the sabbatical gave me the opportunity to create twenty-eight new pieces of instrumental music for my quartet to explore. These “psalms without words” offered another way for me to pray, and have opened some continuing possibilities for me to explore biblically-shaped prayer. Curiously, the composition of this new material did not seem like work. Most of the new pieces came like holy manna descending. They integrated my mind and heart and enlarged my devotional vocabulary.

Remember that moment in the movie “City Slickers” when the wife says to the husband, “Go and find your smile”? Something better than that happened – my smile found me. I stopped running so fast and grace caught up with me. I rediscovered God is good, and after my sabbatical I proclaimed that truth with deeper clarity.

Similarly my sabbatical benefited our congregation in significant ways. The church has a more focused and spiritually grounded pastor. My vocation was strengthened and my resolve clarified. I returned rested and attentive with a soul full of scripture. I am absolutely convinced that a holy God creates us with a hunger for Holy Presence. God wills the health and welfare of God’s servants. Sabbath is far more than a rule; it is a gift given for our human benefit and replenishment. To paraphrase the famous line of John Calvin, we rest from our work so that God can work in us.

The most tangible benefit of taking time away from my congregation is that it gave room for the members of the church to do Christ’s ministry with me side by side. Ministry is now less about me, and more about us. We began to renegotiate the roles and tasks so that there is less on my shoulders and all burdens are more broadly shared. I have improved my ability to receive the gifts and abilities of others, and I invite people now to do what they do best. I see the significance of intentionally equipping others for ministry and getting out of their way.

**Tips for the Weary**

There are many pastors who sense the need for a sabbatical, but they are not sure their congregations would support it. My counsel for them is to take initiative for their own spiritual growth and personal care. Discern if God is calling you to take the time for renewal. Begin planning while you are strong and do not wait until you are worn out. Ask your judicatory if they have a sabbatical
policy; if not, take the initiative to get the ball rolling. Give people plenty of time to let the prospect (and threat) of a sabbatical sink in. Realize that even if your church leaders vote unanimously to give you the time, emotionally speaking, the decision will never be unanimous. And communicate, communicate, communicate!

Everyone should know up front that a good sabbatical will not fix anything. Rather it reveals what we are normally too busy to notice. It can help us to identify some of the emerging issues in ourselves and our vocations, and that is a true blessing. The fact is, we can rest at any time – but we do not do it very well. What’s more, God is good – all the time – but it is hard to taste such goodness if we are running too fast.

While a Doctor of Ministry program provides external affirmation for many pastors, it is the sabbatical that helps Christ call out some of our internal demons. Who are we when nobody else but God is looking? Why do we give more energy to our churches than we give to our loved ones? Can we find the elusive balance between working hard and being good stewards of body and soul? Why is the Good News we proclaim to others so hard to claim for ourselves? Why do we resist the quiet resources of the Christian faith that can sustain us for God’s ministry in the world?

From first-hand experience, I know a good sabbatical will puncture our illusions of self-sufficiency and teach us how to receive the gifts of God and God’s people. For eight Sundays in a row, I sat in front of someone else’s pulpit. I learned to rely on public transportation and bummed rides from others. At a Benedictine monastery I did as I was told – mopping floors, pulling weeds, and painting walls. In other settings, I discovered again the blessings of a completely free day. At every turn I was reminded that my life is a gift from God.

Perhaps for the first time in my ministry, I truly understand what Sabbath is – and I now have a Word to speak about it to the worn-out, depleted Christians in my circle. Postmodern life is a scattered, ungrounded experience for many people. By choosing to withdraw from the busyness for a season, I found myself replenished by sheer grace. It was daunting to discover anew that, when it comes to saving the world, God is sufficient and I am unnecessary. In that experience of honesty, I could emerge with more energy, passion, and focus to join in God’s redemptive work.

Looking Ahead

After a few months of returning from the sabbatical, I slid into some old habits. An over-active Lent lead to too many drive-through lunches. There were thirteen-hour days without a break or a nap, and too many occasions saying “Yes”
without enough defining moments to say “no.” On these occasions, however, I have learned to cut myself a break. The sabbatical taught me that perfection is neither possible nor necessary. After a profound experience of Sabbath, I was freer to let God finish what I cannot. When I caught myself slipping into overwork (or the accompanying self-disgust), I took a deep breath and prayed with Jesus, “Into your hand I commit my spirit; you have redeemed me, O Lord, faithful God (Psalm 31:5).”

I will pursue another sabbatical when the time is right, probably in the seventh year after the last one. Next time, it will be for a full three months. My first attempt was compromised by family scheduling and my worries about cheating the church out of its pastor. Upon reflection, a third month would have allowed me to rest more completely. I can lovingly declare that my well-being is as important as anybody else’s.

After I returned, people saw a spark in the eyes of a renewed pastor. Some dropped by to say, “Good for you,” while others confessed, “I wish I could do something like that.” We talk a lot more these days in our church about well-being than productivity. Those conversations are a blessing of God’s Spirit.

And I share freely what I know in my bones: there is nothing as peaceful as a good Sabbath. It is a time to lean back in God’s arms, to let the heart rate slow, to let mind and heart fill with the promises of grace. It is not enough to sing of green pastures and still waters; we must lie down beside them for our souls to be restored. That is where we learn again how life is a blessing from God’s generous hand and that nothing really separates us from God’s holy love.

In that peaceful time and space, we may still hear the distant cry of the coyotes. But we also know with certainty that they have no power over us.