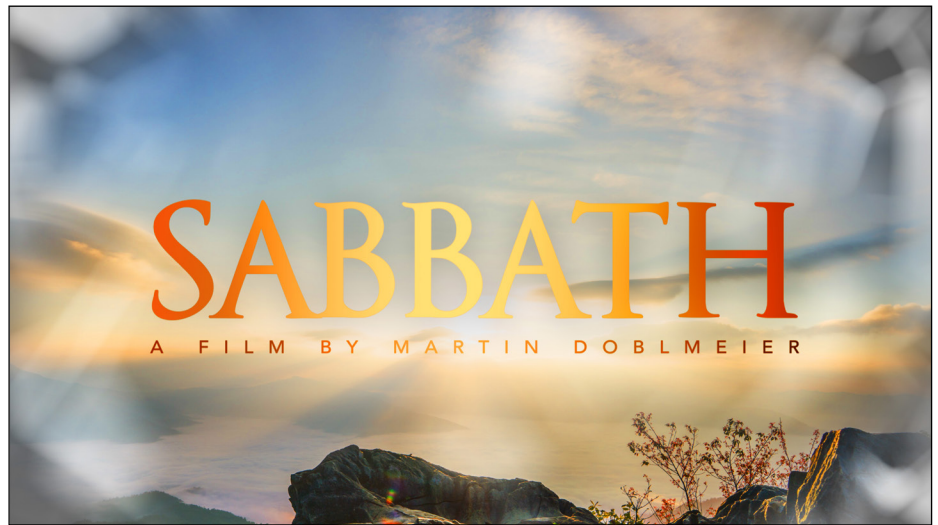


SABBATH documentary explores benefits of rest in 24/7 world

BY MARTIN DOBLMEIER

“I never had a right understanding of the Sabbath. I never thought much about it. I never applied it to my life. All that came to me only recently and I’ve been a pastor for 34 years,” admitted Jeffrey A. Johnson, senior pastor of Eastern Star Baptist Church in Indianapolis.



Johnson’s story is one of many profiled in the new two-hour documentary film *SABBATH*, coming to PBS stations nationwide June 1. The film takes a multi-faith look at the Commandment to rest and why it may be wisdom worth revisiting for our stressed out, 24/7 culture.

From an Orthodox Jewish community in Brooklyn, New York, to a vibrant Hispanic Catholic parish in downtown Los Angeles, to a Sabbath-based farming project in New Jersey, the film explores the many Sabbath threads throughout history and the varied ways Sabbath is practiced today.

Eastern Star Baptist Church is a predominately African American congregation that has three large church sites about 20 miles apart. All told, Johnson preaches every Sunday before several thousand people both in the pews



Jeffrey Johnson
Pastor, Eastern Star Baptist Church

and online. It has been his Sunday routine for more than 30 years. It is telling that despite living

a fully committed Sabbath life for decades, he admits to never delving deeply into the topic. Part of the hope for the *SABBATH* film is that it will not only inspire many to reflect for the first time on the gift of Sabbath, but also inspire those who have sustained a lifelong Sabbath practice to revisit the beauty and blessing of God’s Commandment.

For many, early memories of Sabbath are shaped by rules and regulations, as if Sabbath was more of a punishment than a blessing. Dating back to our early Puritan roots, most of the country honored what became “Blue Laws”—regulations that forced most shops and venues to close on Sundays. The intention was to give people time to attend church, rest, and gather with family and community.

In 21st century America, most Blue Laws are gone and the Sabbath landscape is vastly different—stores are open all week, online shopping never sleeps, and commerce rules the day. But people are now voluntarily pushing back, exchanging rest and nature walks for relentless unfettered enterprise. Some are now taking a “tech Sabbath,” choosing to put down their computers and

phones at least one day a week. It's part of a new reality sometimes referred to as a "secular Sabbath."

For those whose Sabbath expression is anchored in weekly communal worship, everything changed during the pandemic. During the filming of *SABBATH*, we saw the resilience of many congregations that quickly found ways to adapt to new technologies to keep congregants engaged. Most pastors now accept that a hybrid form of worship will be the working model for the near future. It has been an incredibly challenging few years, but the Sabbath practice survived.

Yet, Sabbath is intended to be something more than weekly worship. Sabbath calls us to something far deeper. *Menuha* is the Hebrew word for "rest" but, more importantly, it evokes a sense of inner peace and tranquility. Rabbi Manis Friedman, one of the leading voices in Brooklyn's Hasidic community, says that *Shabbat* is not about rest—"that's a poor definition, a poor translation. The real word is contentment. If you are really experiencing *Shabbat*, you are experiencing a true contentment."

In his classic work *The Sabbath*, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel—considered by many the most prophetic Jewish voice of the 20th century—famously called Sabbath a "cathedral in time." He was juxtaposing humanity's passion for endlessly building with God's commitment to the sanctification of time. "The seventh day is man's armistice in the cruel struggle for existence," Heschel writes. "It is a truce in all conflicts personal and social. It is an exodus from tension."

Heschel's daughter remembers that it was forbidden to talk about provocative topics on *Shabbat* during her childhood. Six days a week, her father was fully committed to the Civil Rights struggle, the plight of Soviet Jews, and the end of the Vietnam War. But on *Shabbat*, those topics were off limits. "Those were not appropriate

issues to discuss. They were not compatible with the spirit of *Shabbat*," she said. "Instead, we talked only about happy things." It is not just the body that needs Sabbath rest, but the soul needs rest as well.



Not far from the main campus of Princeton Theological Seminary is a unique agricultural project called The Farminary. This 21-acre regenerative farm is both a successful enterprise and classroom under the direction of theologian Nathan Stucky, author of *Wrestling With Rest*. Here, the next generation of ministers and church leaders learn about Sabbath principles as they dirty their hands

harvesting vegetables. Raised Mennonite on a Kansas farm, Stucky reminded his class, "One of the things we have been painfully slow to

recognize is that our exhaustion and the overall exhaustion of the broader creation are two sides of the same coin."

Sabbath is the grand finale in the story of creation that ends with the inescapable truth that we are both part of creation and the ones responsible for creation itself.

At a time when interfaith conversations are more important than ever, Sabbath becomes a fertile entry point to unpack core ideas, traditions, and visions about care for the physical world we all share. Most faith traditions now have offices dedicated to the care of our environment, and Sabbath provides the axis upon which to rest those often difficult conversations.

Seventh-day Adventists are a Christian denomination who hold as sacred a Saturday Sabbath. Adventists are serious about their Sabbath rest—along with

a commitment to a healthy diet and exercise, they are among the healthiest people on the planet, living on average 10 years longer than non-Adventists. Honoring a weekly day of rest is a key component in that success.

Sabbath also makes another contribution to our overall well-being. At its core, a consistent Sabbath practice teaches us to trust. When we honor Sabbath in our work environment, we should trust that our coworkers will not take advantage when we are gone for a day. At home, we should trust that our family and friends will join us in Sabbath so we do not practice alone. Most importantly, Sabbath calls us to trust in God's plan that for one day every week, we can stop exercising dominion over the world and leave God in control.

In many ways, Sabbath is wildly countercultural. Resting is not in the DNA of most Americans, and trust is in short supply. We have reason to be cautious, but the better angels of our nature tell us we need to find a balance of being wise and vigilant yet nurturing of trust. As we prepare to enter a post-pandemic world, Sabbath offers both a reason and an opportunity to honor the roadmap God laid before us from the beginning—a plan that calls us to celebrate creation, enjoy our Sabbath rest, and trust in something greater than ourselves.

The film *SABBATH*, along with companion study materials, will be available free of charge on the www.journey-films.com site beginning May 1.



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Watch the trailer:

