

“A Tree for the Healing of Nations: The Gift of Sabbath and the Sabbath of Gifts”

By Emmanuel M Katongole

Then the angel showed me the river of life-giving water, sparkling like crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down in the middle of its street. On either side of the river was the tree of life, bearing twelve kinds of fruits, yielding its fruit every month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations (Rev. 22: 1-2).

Murray Johnson has captured very well this dream at the end of the book of Revelation. That she has done so on a quilt is itself very significant. For, to imagine the different pieces of cloth that make up this quilt – in different sizes and colors -- stitched together, one piece at a time, their individuality and differences standing out, and yet together making a beautiful ‘smooth’ quilt is to imagine God knitting the unique histories of our lives, as individuals, communities and nations into one smooth quilt of God’s new creation.

Something else arrests you about Johnson’s splendid artwork. It is the simple, yet joyful abundance of its details. There is the river, cascading down through the rocks. The rocks at once look like wild animals resting on the banks of the river, and in other places like fish in midair. And the trees on the banks of the river, with the big tree in the middle frame--its leaves singing with the joyful abundance of colors and flowers and fruits. Everything that human beings need: food, water, shelter and medicine, both for our bodies as well as for the ‘healing of nations’: it is all here.

That is what the book of revelation is about: dreams, and dreams and more dreams, all pointing to the promise of Rev. 21:1: “See I am making a new heaven and a new earth.” That is what John saw: a city, in the middle of which was a river of life-giving water, with the tree of life. But lest one thinks that this was the work of human hands, the book of Revelation makes it clear: the city came down from heaven, shinning ‘like a bride’ prepared by God. Everything is given by God. The message, it seems to me is very clear. God promises: I will give you everything – I mean everything – you need.

Give! What strange language this is to our ears, so much used to the language of ‘deserving’ and ‘earning’. We need to retrain our ears to this language and our eyes to this vision. What does it take for us to ‘see’ what John saw - the vision of the simple and joyful abundance of God’s creation? How can we receive it, welcome it? Live in it?

It takes Sabbath!

Receiving God's New Creation: the Gifts of Sabbath

One must remember a significant detail mentioned at the beginning of the book of revelation—namely, that it was ‘on the Lord’s day’ (1;10) that John was taken up in a trance and saw the visions in the book Revelation, which conclude with the vision of the tree of life.

This is a very significant detail. For it suggest that God’s new creation and the healing of the world’s brokenness are gifts we can only ‘see’ and thus receive if we live on in the Lord’s day—that is, if we live in Sabbath.

But what is it about Sabbath, about this ‘Lord’s day’ that makes it possible to see and receive the gifts of God’s new creation and of healing. There are at least five gifts of the Lord’s Day.

1. Sabbath and rest

It is a day of rest. We live in a world that is driven by ‘scarcity’. That is why we work so hard—not only to make ends meet, but to ‘secure’ a good future. We spend every moment of the day busy with one project after another. If we are able to steal some time and ‘rest’, it is only to re-charge our batteries for the next task. We are really never able to rest from this world of busyness, in order to even see the lie we have created for ourselves about securing our future. It is only through rest that we are able to see and thus receive the simple and joyful abundance of God’s gifts of creation.

2. Sabbath and imagination:

The problem has to do partly with the poverty of our imagination. The book of Revelation begins with John ‘being taken up’(1:10). We can only ‘see’ and therefore receive the gifts of God’s new creation if we, like John, are able to be taken up in a trance so as to see visions and speak in metaphors. This is the gift of imagination. The world has no patience for metaphor. This is also perhaps a reason why Revelation seems to be such a hopelessly frustrating book for us. It resists explanations, and since we are such literal people, we neither have the patience nor the skills to get into its world of rich metaphors and imagery and symbols. And yet, it is now clear that if we have to dream a vision of new creation, we need to be like John, taken up in a trance, and so speak from that place between comprehension and incomprehension. This is what happens on the Lord’s Day through worship.

3. Sabbath and Worship:

The gift of new creation is about learning to worship the one and only true God, and the lamb that was slain. That is why the book of Revelation is really about worship. Everybody worships. The four living creatures give honor and glory to the one seated on the throne (4: 9); The twenty four elders prostrate themselves before the one on the throne (4:10-11; 5:14; 19:4), and fall down before the lamb (5:8); The great crowd and all the living angels prostrated themselves before the throne and worshipped (7: 11-12). In

fact, the entire vision is presented as if it is the temple in heaven that is thrown open, and John gets a peek of the celestial worship. (15:8). The struggle at the heart of Revelation is between the one seated on the throne and the beast who has fascinated the whole world into worshipping him (13:4).

4. *Sabbath and the veil of appearances:*

But if the struggle of Revelation is about worship, it is not always easy to tell right worship from false worship. The beast is not always easy to tell apart from the lamb, for just like the lamb, it has two horns (13:11); and like the lamb it is capable of performing great signs (13:13), even making fire come from heaven, thereby deceiving many. This is a particularly crucial observation for us today. We live in an age of appearances, in which it is hard to tell the 'real' from the fake. Moreover, we have learned to cover up our brokenness and our real needs with a sea of cosmetic and sophisticated superficiality. If we are to receive God's gifts of *simple*, joyful abundance we have to cut through the veils of cosmetic superficiality to recover a genuine simplicity and rightly name our brokenness. Such recovery is only possible by learning right worship which Sabbath is all about.

5. *Sabbath and the unmasking the desire of nations:*

The Christians to whom the book of Revelation is addressed lived in a much more 'peaceful' time than we have tended to imagine. Revelation is addressed to Christians in Asia Minor (not Rome)—Christians who, for the most part, have lived on the fringes of successive empires in the region. Only recently have they come under the full jurisdiction of Rome's power, and are for the first time enjoying the full benefits of trade and riches of the *Pax Romana*. That, more than any physical persecution is what the book of Revelation is concerned about – the gradual accommodation of Christians into the idolatrous desires and worship that came with their new found 'freedom'.

John uses different images to refer to this danger. He calls Rome a beast from the sea, a harlot, and a city marked by glamour, riches, and endless entertainment. But none of these descriptions is as telling as Babylon's own boastful description of herself: "*I sit enthroned as queen; I am no widow; and I will never know grief.*" (18:7)

Strength, beauty, power and self-sufficiency--all viewed as an 'achievement--are not only the desire of Babylon; they are the desires of nations, desire we unsuspectingly live into and make our own. That is what John warns the Christians of Asia Minor about – putting before them a mirror, thus unmasking ('apocalypse') the desires that have unsuspectingly captured them.

That is what the 'tree for the healing of the nations' is all about: an anecdote for the lie that Babylon represents through a reminder that the security, sufficiency, beauty and health that Christians desperately need are not an achievement made possible through Rome's military and economic conquest. They are, instead, gifts given by God in ever simple and yet bounteous ways.

The healing of Nations: the Sabbath of gifts

Just as this Good News is revealed to John on the Lord's Day, it takes Sabbath for us to see this truth and rest in the simple yet joyful abundance of God's promise. Having a new building, new classrooms, an Institute for Care at the End of Life, and a beautiful new chapel can be a good reminder of this promise. But I must hasten to add ONLY IF such a space is committed to a life of rest, to the shaping of the imagination, to worship, and to a constant reminder that we are in Babylon. Only if this space can cultivate the critical skills of unmasking the desires, lies and demons that have already captured us. Only if it is a space is committed to forming lives able to resist the busyness and superficiality of our age.

Sabbath is not only a gift we receive from God; it is the best gift we have to offer the world. This new space should remind us that Sabbath is all we are about. Perhaps we should hang a big neon sign out there in the quad announcing: 'Sabbath Is Us'. But of course that can only be true if Sabbath is not just an hour, or a day within our busy week, but our way of life. Sabbath must become the very core of life in this new space.

But we do not need a neon sign to remind us. We have something better: Murray Johnson's quilt and its depiction of the river and the tree of life. May this piece of art remind us of the gifts of God's creation. May it invite us to live on in Sabbath. And may Sabbath become our way of life. For only on the Lord's Day are we able to see, receive, and dwell in God's simple and abundant gifts.
