

# “Deeply Formed”

February 21, 2021

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Mark 1:29-35; Exodus 20: 1-2, 8-11 (wk 49) Wall Street United Virtual Church

This is the beginning of a special season — a time to step back and deepen our faith in preparation for Easter. The period of 40 days (not counting Sundays) leading up to Easter is called Lent.



To observe Lent we are looking through a book by Rich Villodas called *The Deeply Formed Life*.

In it, 5 values of a deeply formed life are explored. Over the next 5 Sundays the sermons will focus on these themes and include some of the content of this life-

changing book.

The theme for today is the Contemplative Life: slowing down and stepping away from the pace and demands of the world so that we can take a step towards God. The three practices the author recommends are: 1. Silent Prayer 2. Sabbath Keeping and 3. The Slow reading of Scripture. This slowing down and stepping away then allows us to return to the world refreshed, renewed and better able to serve.

Rich Villodas is a pastor of a church in bustling Queens, New York City. He begins with a funny story of a time on a Saturday morning when a guy across the street started frantically waving his arms and shouted out to him: “Are you Jewish?” Rich thought it was an odd question but he shouted back “No, I’m Puerto Rican.” The man yelled “Good! I need help!” He explained he needed to get his 91-year-old mother from her apartment on the 6<sup>th</sup> floor down to the front door.

So Rich followed the stressed-out man into an apartment building where he was hurried into an elevator. The man told Rich to hit floor 6, and up they went. When they got there the man yelled out from the elevator: “Ma! Rich is here!” A 90-year-old woman with a walker, wearing a pearl necklace and high heels that were too big yelled back “Who’s Rich?” The woman was hustled into the elevator, where she kept exclaiming over and over how busy she was. Rich couldn’t figure out what was going on and why they needed him — until they asked Rich to press the elevator button for the ground floor, and the penny dropped. It was the Sabbath, and these were Orthodox Jews who were prohibited from working on the Sabbath — which included pressing an elevator button! That’s why they needed him!

Rich couldn't help but think how strange this scene was. On the Sabbath of all days—the day of rest—they were rushed and stressed. He wondered about how they could be so out of step with the purpose of the Sabbath. He also wondered about the fact that if, at the age of 90, this woman was worked up about being so busy, would she ever find rest on this side of death?

Rich points out how much our whole society keeps to a frenetic pace. Like Rich I have seen too well the irony of retirement where the only thing that distinguishes it from working life is that now you don't have holidays or days off! From the cradle to the grave, busyness is part of our culture.

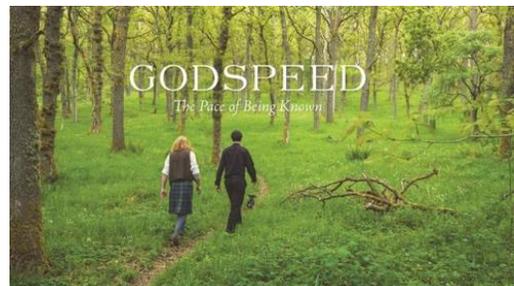
Well, it was — before this pandemic started. What has been challenging about the pandemic for many is that we have gone from running on a moving sidewalk to a dead stop. Of course, for those in the health care professions or teachers, clergy, front-line workers and all those whose work keeps going and changing, the pace has picked up even more. The truth is that even if your life has not been busy in terms of activities and appointments, for most of us during this pandemic time our lives have not been restful and peaceful, but instead have been filled with anxiety and worry. Many keep the television, the news or social media on all day.

Regardless of whether this time has been painfully slow and boring or insanely busy and stressful for you, there is something that we need to lean in and learn. That is the value of living a more contemplative life—a life that is marked by prayer, Sabbath rest and the slow reading of scripture.

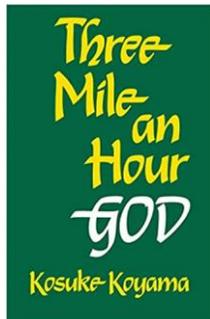
I really understand this as a critical part of having a deeply formed faith, but I have to confess that I still struggle with it. Silence, sitting still or even taking things slowly is a program that seems to be missing from my operating system. I'm probably slightly ADD, I don't know. Nevertheless, I recognize the value ... but it just does not come naturally to me. I even have a bit of a hard time accepting the fact that I seem to be a walker and not a runner. I love the idea of running; I just hate running itself. But for the last four months I have developed a regular habit and love of walking.

Theologian N.T Wright has said that sometimes we need to slow down to catch up with God.

In a wonderful documentary called *Godspeed* (<https://vimeo.com/200206468> or google “Godspeed documentary”) N.T. Wright says: “God is doing what God is doing in God's time. And, maybe, if we had to slow down a bit, we might paradoxically catch up with God.”



Another author and theologian, Kosuke Koyama, argues that the speed of God is three miles an hour. Why 3 miles an hour? That's the speed at which humans walk.



*“Love has its speed”, Koyama writes, “It is a spiritual speed. It is a different kind of speed from the technological speed to which we are accustomed. It goes on in the depth of our life, whether we notice or not, at three miles an hour. It is the speed we walk and therefore the speed the love of God walks.”* These theologians have pointed out that this is how Jesus practiced his ministry, at walking speed.

The pandemic has helped me realize that slowing down is part of what we are called to do, but the bigger part is seeking to catch up to God. The most important part is tuning into God. In the 12 steps of Alcoholics Anonymous the 11<sup>th</sup> step is: *“Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God, as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.”*

Slowing down, welcoming more silence, reading scripture in a way that allows the text to sink in deeply—perhaps chewing and meditating on a thought are ways that we improve our conscious contact with God.

Another way is through Sabbath keeping.

In a world where Sunday no longer exists as a day of rest, we as Christians need to reclaim the practice of carving out that day of rest. It's not going to be done for us. We have to place the boundaries on our time and our busyness. Rich Villodas points out that the Sabbath is grace—it's a gift. Sabbath is not a reward for hard work done, it's given as a gift so that we can be regularly refreshed in our relationship with God.

I have 2 days off a week: Friday and Saturday; but because a lot of my work culminates on Sunday, it's sometimes hard to get everything done so that I actually have any days off.

It has only been a year or two since I made a commitment to Sabbath keeping. If I was not a minister, my Sabbath would include Sunday — but because Sunday is a work day for me, I work really hard to keep the Sabbath from Friday mid-afternoon until Saturday evening. I don't check my emails and unless it's an emergency I don't respond to messages that can wait. Sabbath is a time to lay down what is work for me and pick up what brings me joy: getting outside, listening to music, hanging out with the family. It's up to me to put up the boundaries so that I can have this time. You have to figure out what is “work” for you that you will stop doing.

Maybe it's social media or the news that you need to break away from for 24 hours.

Another reason that Sabbath is important is that it allows us to practice laying down unfinished business. There is always more to do. In life there are always groceries that need to be purchased, laundry that needs putting away, an email that needs to be sent. Sabbath in part is about saying "There is more to do, but I'm going to stop anyway and trust that it will be ok without me." This is really hard. I find it hard to just stop and let some of the work stay unfinished.

Why is this so important? For one thing it is a practice that keeps us from being a slave to work. You are a slave to work when you let it control you. God does not want slaves — that's why he set the Israelites free from slavery in Egypt. Stopping work, even with that uncomfortable feeling that it's not quite done, means that *you are in charge of work, instead of work being in charge of you*; and it is a sign that we trust God. We trust that God will take care of things that we cannot.

Friends, this is a really good practice — because, let me bring you in on a secret: one day you will leave this world with unfinished business.

I will never forget being at the bedside of Helen Marshall while she was dying. Helen was one of the dear saints of this church. Her mind was still sharp as a tack and that allowed me to pray with her and lead her through a short exercise of giving thanks for life, of laying down the regrets and the unfinished business and sending on a blessing. I will never forget how upset she was that she didn't have the energy to thank everyone who had sent her a card. It really, really bothered her. Of course, it seemed a little funny to me that someone on their death bed would worry about writing thank-you cards. But this was her unfinished business. I remember that my dad, as his health was declining, really struggled with a feeling that there was so much he still needed to do.

It is not a comfortable feeling, laying down the unfinished business — but that is partly how we say to God, "You are my God and I am human — frail and finite — but by your grace I am enough and this week is enough. This life is enough." This is how Jesus was able to walk away from all those who wanted more from him so that he could pray to God alone. This is how after only 3 years of ministry Jesus was able to stretch out his arms on the cross and say in truth: "It is finished."

I have so much to learn about this. Here is the truth: when we slow down, when we take a break from our work, there are some things that won't get done by us and that's OK. Our society says it's all up to you. Do more. See more. Buy more. Be more. Work harder. You got this!

God says "I brought you out of slavery. Don't worship *any God* but me... not the god of work and business and not the god of more. Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy."

The contemplative life of Sabbath keeping, slowing down with a conscious contact with God, helps us to practice and remember that by the grace and power of God we are loved and we are enough ... just the way we are. Thanks be to God. Amen.