

HallowThanksMas

by [L. Gregory Jones](#) in the [December 22, 1999](#) issue

We are coming to the close of the season of HallowThanksMas. It begins the last week of October and extends until Christmas Day. At the end of October the children are loaded up on sugar that doesn't seem to leave their systems until early January. Shopping centers have Christmas decorations up in mid-October, and then the materialistic press to buy more and more sets in. Throughout this season, adults become frenetic, anxious and—all too often—depressed. Such depression is particularly acute for those people whose calendars are not filled and who feel more acutely than ever the absence of places to go, of loved ones with whom to celebrate.

I have never liked HallowThanksMas. In the past, I went along with a grudging acceptance that it was something we—and particularly those of us with children—just had to endure. I have found ways to resist the excessive sugar and the materialism of the season. This year, however, I reflected on the ways in which the frenetic pace of HallowThanksMas may be a microcosm of our culture throughout the year—including especially my own life.

It was late in October, the weekend before the beginning of HallowThanksMas. I was getting ready to fly out to the Midwest for a retreat I was leading for clergy and laity. The folks had requested that I reflect on the theme "Connecting to Our Calling." I thought I would spend a portion of the time reflecting on the ways in which, though our lives are filled with things to do, we often find ourselves unfulfilled. I would propose the Christian practice of "keeping sabbath" as a way to find renewal in our own calling as disciples and ministers of the gospel.

Just before I got on the plane, I bought a copy of James Gleick's new book *Faster: The Acceleration of Just About Everything*. I thought it might provide some helpful background. I mused about multiple ironies: that I was reading a book about the acceleration of just about everything on an airplane whose arrival was very close to the beginning of the retreat because I had needed to attend several meetings earlier in the morning. And I was reading the book because I still needed to prepare some final details for the retreat because I just hadn't had enough time to work on it

earlier in the week.

I finally put down Gleick's book, not finding it as helpful as I had hoped. Instead I began reading Dorothy Bass's *Receiving the Day: Christian Practices for Opening the Gift of Time*. Though I was confident that this book would be illuminating and enjoyable, I had been hesitant to open it partly because I had already shaped my comments about "keeping sabbath" for the retreat, and so reading it seemed less urgent, and partly because I sensed that I might need to change some habits of work and scheduling if I took her argument seriously.

On page three Bass's gracious words hit me square between the eyes: "Busy people may think that what we need is a few more open boxes on the pages of our datebooks." Yes! I thought. "But in fact that would provide only a flat and short-lived remedy, and not only because those boxes would soon fill up like all the others. What we really need is time of a different quality. We need the kind of time that is measured in a yearly round of feasts and fasts, in a life span that begins when a newborn is placed in her parents' arms, and in a day that ends and begins anew as a line of darkness creeps across the edge of the earth. This kind of time exists, but we have learned not to notice it. Our gaze is fixed instead on a datebook, some of us anxiously hoping to squeeze into its little boxes all that we must do, others weeping to see that so many of the pages are blank." Oh.

I discovered that what I most needed, and what our culture most needs, is not a sharp disjunction between faster and slower, or even the rhythms of six days of work and a day of rest. Nor do we even need simply the fuller understanding of sabbath as a time both for rest and for family and community. Rather, we need "time of a different quality."

As I read *Receiving the Day* I felt the force of God's judgment. Yet as is the case with genuinely receiving God's judgment, I sensed a judgment of grace. Instead of trying to cram time for sabbath-keeping into my schedule, or even adding "rest" at the end of my "to do" list, I discovered a need and a desire to cultivate practices for "opening the gift of time." Could I refocus my life in a way that keeps the gospel's sense of time at the heart of my life, in the core of my imagination? Can we refocus our lives in such a way?

As I have lived through the last two months, I have realized that I am not disturbed by the busyness of HallowThanksMas. I enjoy being busy. But I am disturbed by the frenetic pace that lacks the quality of time that renews, refreshes and redeems. This

year, though my schedule is still full and there are few empty boxes, I have sought to resist HallowThanksMas more intentionally. By contrast, Advent—one of the central ways in which Christians open the gift of time—has become again for me a time of patience, of preparation, of repentance. This year, I think I will be ready for Christmas.