

Glen Ridge Congregational Church
The Rev. John Sampson
“Everything Everywhere All at Once”



Still from Koyaanisqatsi, Dir. Godfrey Reggio, 1983

Luke 13:10 – 17
August 24, 2025

Will you pray with me?

God, may the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all of our hearts, be acceptable to you, our rock, and our redeemer.

Amen.

In the story we just heard, Jesus asks us to think about the ways we may be so committed to religious observance that we can use it as an excuse for ignoring those who suffer right in front of us. And it would be easy to see Jesus' actions as a critique that dismisses the value and centrality of our spiritual practices, like the practice of sabbath, a weekly discipline of drawing closer to God's presence in our lives. But I think Jesus is really asking us to create a meaningful balance between the two.

Last week, I shared an example of God's faithful response to the suffering of our African American brothers and sisters. A response that occurred in our lifetimes. I reflected on the ministry of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., focusing on his good work in the desegregation of the busing system in Montgomery, Alabama. This was a moment when God inspired a man of faith to not just share words of hope, but to do the hard work of hope. And with God's blessing, those buses were desegregated.

We speak and know of MLK, but there were so many others committed to the work of love in the Civil Rights movement. We may not always know their names, but without them nothing would have changed.

This morning, I want to share with you the story of another faithful man, who was inspired by his religious convictions to step into the hard work of hope. He might not be as familiar to us as MLK, but, in his own way, he was as revolutionary as King. His name was Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, and he showed us that our Jewish brothers and sisters are as committed to unbinding our nation from the sin of racism that has plagued our nation for centuries as anyone else.

Born in Poland in 1907, Heschel was educated in Berlin, arrested by the Gestapo in Frankfurt, and fled to London, and then the United States as Germany was preparing to invade Poland. Arriving in New York City, Heschel became a professor at the Jewish Theological Seminary. He is the author of many influential books on Jewish religion and history.

But, like King, he did more than simply write books from his ivory tower. He did the work of hope, freeing those of us who had been literally and metaphorically shackled to the spirit of racism and segregation. No matter who they might be.

I was in Frankfurt a couple of years ago. And throughout the city there are these small brass plaques set in the sidewalks in front of houses and apartment buildings. And on each plaque is the name, or names, of those who lived in that house, and the date they were arrested by the Nazis. These plaques witness to the fact that those who suffer antisemitism and racism, misogyny and homophobia are always our neighbors, if not ourselves.

Heschel knew what it was to live in a community and be targeted by the Nazis. He knew what it was to be arrested by the Gestapo. And he knew how these things were in complete opposition to God's love and dream for our world. And these truths led him to act.

Look at the pictures of the march on Selma, and you will see MLK right there in the front of the group. And right next to MLK was Heschel. Heschel is credited with opening the eyes of many Jews to God's call that to be faithful has to be something more than being simply observant of religious practice and dogma. One has to be engaged in the work of liberation for those who are oppressed, for those suffering, for those whose plight is easy to ignore. Like Jesus, Heschel understood that our religious faith can never be an excuse for not acting to help those who are in crisis.

AND.

In God's kin-dom, there is always a holy "And."

And one of Heschel's most famous books is called *The Sabbath*. It is a work dedicated to a profound understanding of the practice of setting aside one day of the week to open ourselves to God's presence in our lives. In Heschel's view, sabbath is a day of rest, but it is something so much more than a day for reenergizing our bodies and minds. It is an ongoing practice for our encounter with the Holy, and to remember and live again knowing who we are, and to whom we belong.

I think for many of us it is easier to understand our call to do the work of hope and liberation in our world than it is to set a boundary on our time. I chose the image on the cover of today's bulletin, a still from the movie *Koyaanisqatsi*, to echo the frenzy of our over-committed lives. Lives that are filled with joy, and often a sense of being overwhelmed by our responsibilities, and our calendars. We often feel, to quote another movie, that we have to do everything, everywhere, all at once.

But even as Heschel committed to the work of liberation he trusted in the Jewish observance of the sabbath. On Friday evenings he was at home, with his family, before the sun set, he watched as his wife and daughter light the candles, and he led the prayer that welcomed sabbath into their home. For a day, he put down the work of writing and teaching, and lived again as God's child, surrounded by the love of his family, and the blessings of his life. On the sabbath, God liberated him from the oppression of things and schedules and even from "the fires of religious indignation". And in this moment, his daughter wrote, he was given a foretaste of paradise.

In Heschel's life of faith we see not just a commitment to the work of unbinding and liberation. We don't just see his commitment to observing the sabbath. We see a balance between the two. We see each part of his life supporting and informing the other. We see the necessity of rest to do the work God commands us to do, and we see that without the commitment to liberation the observance of the sabbath is hollow and dead.

I think this is the balance that God invites us to embrace, even in our lives.

Amen.