Reading  from The Long Walk  by David Blanchard

The best story I ever heard about gift-giving ... [is] about an African boy who wanted to give a gift to his teacher who was going back to England. The child had no money and his options were few. The day before the teacher was to leave, the child brought her a large seashell. ... [When asked where it was from] the boy told her there was only one spot where such extraordinary shells could be found, and when he named the place, a certain bay many miles away, the teacher was speechless.

"... It's gorgeous... wonderful... but you shouldn't have gone all that way to get a gift for me." His eyes brightening, the boy answered, "Long walk part of gift."

... Most of what we give each other requires some version of the "long walk." The long walk we sign on for with children, who need our patience, our wisdom, our honesty, and our trust more than we might first have imagined when their lives began. The long walk we share with our spouses, which takes us through uncharted, unexpected territories of sickness and health, richer and poorer, better and worse. The long walk we take with our friends when they are grieving the loss of someone they love, when they are ill, when they are discouraged. The long walk of feeling a sense of unity with those whom prosperity has left behind. The long walk of reconciliation with all that separates us from a deep sense of life's great purpose and meaning. "Long walk part of gift."

Sermon: "Unexpected Gifts"

A few weeks ago, I was talking with someone who was lamenting the loss of moral values in our society, and he said, what America needed to do was put the ten commandments back front and center in our society and in our schools. Now, I happen to think there are some really important rules to live by in the ten commandments, particularly honoring your parents, not murdering, not lying or stealing, not being prone to jealousy. But, I also have a sarcastic streak that runs in me, and so when he said that, I thought quietly in my head -- yes, absolutely, especially the fourth one -- that one has totally gone by the wayside.
So, anyone know what the fourth commandment is? It’s my favorite. It’s “Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy.”

The word sabbatical derives from the Hebrew, Shabbat, or Sabbath, meaning “cessation” or “time of rest.” The fourth commandment, “Remember the Sabbath” refers directly to the Genesis creation story, in the Torah, the Hebrew Bible. In the first chapter there is a creation story telling how God created the world in seven days.

Wait, wait, some of you might say -- creation only took six days and on the seventh day the Creator rested. But, the text says, that on the seventh day God finished the work of creation and God rested and made that day of rest holy. Many Jewish commentaries on the text are clear that creation took seven days -- I am not speaking literally, but the message of the text is that rest was -- is -- an integral part of creation. Only on the seventh day, a day of rest, is creation finished. For, without rest, we cannot be creative, inspired, present enough to do what is good. The Sabbath is essential for making room to cultivate intention and awareness, to step away from what we do, to think about why we do it -- to make time to connect to creation itself, not just the demands and preoccupations of our 24/7 lives. And the man I was talking to was absolutely right. We do a pretty poor job of remembering this commandment.

This week, Elaine Warner passed along to me the most recent issue of the Christian Science Monitor Weekly magazine, which has as its cover article “Powering Down,” an article about summer vacations and the pursuit of doing...nothing (May 27, 2013; Vol.105. Issue 27). I think Elaine is rightly trying to help me get ready for sabbatical.

The article quotes a 2012 study which found that, on average, Americans leave 9.2 days of vacation they are given from work unused and that was a 48 percent increase from the prior year. With a five day work week, that’s almost two weeks of vacation that, on average, is not taken. Another poll showed that one third of employees have lunch at their desk each day and another third take no lunch at all or only occasionally. These statistics certainly reflect my work habits -- and maybe some of yours.

Add to this, the prevalence of electronic communication which makes it very hard to really get away. Another survey conducted of executives and employees from multiple fields found that more than 40 percent checked in with work at least every other day while on vacation. Marriott Hotels surveyed their travelers and found that 50 percent check their email and voicemail multiple times a day. But what the article in Christian Science Monitor suggested is that vacation -- letting go of work --
actually results in greater productivity, enthusiasm and creativity when we return to work, especially when we have time in our vacations to rest.

The article explored a new trend among Americans to spend their vacations doing nothing. Rather than loading up the car and kids and heading off to many different sites and adventure parks and days packed with activity, people told of staying home, or of traveling to a national park or someplace and then staying put. On the agenda -- to do nothing. They might take walks in nature, read a little, take naps, but nothing needed to get done, accomplished, or achieved. And, more importantly, they were leaving cell phones and laptops behind. Turning off email and alarm clocks -- really getting away from the demands of work and the increasing expectation of constant contact and of always being available.

Dale and Lois Fisher, gave me a wonderful, and unexpected, gift a few weeks ago, to help me get ready for sabbatical. Here it is. It looks like a simple enough brown paper bag. Now here are the instructions:

Reverend Susan:

This bag is to be filled when you begin your sabbatical.

The contents of this bag should include:
   All cell phones and other electronic communication devices
   Watches
   Email
   Fax Machine
   Any other communication mechanisms that UUCP might use to reach you including skywriting
   All worries and concerns about the well-being of UUCP

You may open the bag and retrieve these things on the last day of your sabbatical. We will miss you but we will be fine. Relax and enjoy your well earned time away. Come back refreshed and renewed.

So, I am going to follow your instructions, Dale and Lois. I really will be away. I am ready to try some of this doing nothing for a while. During my three month sabbatical, I really will be disconnected from the congregation. My email will be turned off and the messages will be deleted. I will likely stop using facebook. In our social media age, it’s actually a challenge to figure out how to disconnect from work while staying connected to family, but I will figure it out. Remember, no calls about UUCP. And I will honor Dale’s and Lois’s prescription to put all the worries and
concerns about UUCP here in this bag. Rev. Linda Lawrence will handle pastoral issues and Heidi Parminter the business and administrative side of things, and lay leaders will step up to lead worship and the spiritual leadership aspects of congregational life. You are up to it. And you will be great.

I do have some things to accomplish while I am away, but much of what I hope to do is rediscover that the long walk is part of the gift, that the long walk is part of the gift of ministry and beloved community. You are giving me a gift with this sabbatical -- an opportunity to take a long walk and to see what new inspiration, unexpected wisdom or understanding I might find on that walk and bring it back to share with you. To refill the well of the spirit from which life and love and creativity and ministry flow.

And I hope for you all that this summer and this time of sabbatical will bring unexpected gifts for you -- reminders of your strength, your health, your leadership as a congregation. May each of you as individuals, also be blessed by unexpected gifts this summer and an opportunity, whether it is only in moments or in brief weekends to pursue the art of doing nothing, of ceasing from work, of Sabbath.

The commandment, Remember the Sabbath, is not one that I follow very well -- those of you who occasionally get emails from me on my day off know this. But it is one whose value I trust and whose wisdom I try to follow, because rest is an essential part of good work.

It is rest that allows us to bring our best to our families, our lovers, our children, to ourselves, not to mention our work. It is rest that lets us step away from what we do, to focus on who we are, what we love and to remember our connection to that which has so many names - to life, to creation, to beauty, to God, to the sacred. Whatever the name, Sabbath is a time to remember who we are and who we want to be and what we want to create, separate from all the activities of what we do. We might all be better off if we took that commandment to rest -- to cease from work, to unplug, and spend time as friends and family, to enjoy this wonderful miracle of life -- to take a long walk and rest in this world before we miss the chance.

Okay, I think I am ready now. (Put watch, phone, telephone in bag) I am off to take a long walk now -- and you are too. May unexpected gifts make their way to us during this time apart. May we all find some time this summer to do nothing, to make room for the life and the spirit and our families to bring us unexpected gifts -- to reminds us -- as the Kiss Kiss fish was reminded -- of who we are and what in us is good.
I am grateful for this gift. I know I am fortunate to have it. I promise to come back rested. I will miss you. But you will be fine and so will I. And after our long walks, we will join our paths together again, and take on the next chapter of our ministry because we still have so much to discover and share and grow together. Thank you. I love you.