I knew there might be a problem when I climbed into the pulpit where I was the new pastor to put my sermon on it and saw the clock. I guess I should say “clocks.” There were three of them. There was one large one on the back wall of the sanctuary. That’s usually a tell. Who, when they are designing these Sabbath spaces, often with exquisite attention to color and symbolism, looks around and says, “You know what this sanctuary needs...a giant clock on the back wall!” No one says that unless there’s another reason...a reason beyond aesthetics...the need to get out on time. A big clock on the back wall that the preacher cannot help but see is a good time management technique.

But this church also had a digital clock affixed to the pulpit, so that every time I looked down at my manuscript, I saw blinking back at me the time, inching ever closer to the noon hour. The noon hour is how I learned about the third clock. I could not see it, but I heard it come noon. A gentleman sitting on the second row had a watch set to start beeping then. He was not inclined to shut it off.

I learned later that this same gentleman was the person behind the big clock on the wall and the digital clock on the pulpit. I asked the person who revealed that to me why he was so concerned about time. “We call him Triple-B,” she said. “He will tell you he wants to ‘Beat the Baptists to Bittner’s.’ Bittner’s was a restaurant in Memphis where this church member went with his wife every Sunday, and if we ran late, the giant Baptist church close by would let out and he would have to wait.

Walter Bruggemann tells of a family in the church in rural Salinas County, Missouri. “Mr. G, the town grocer, and his wife always sat up front in church. Every Sunday, during the last five minutes of the sermon by the pastor (Bruggemann’s father), Mr. G and his wife would rather ceremoniously walk the long aisle to the back of the church and leave. They did not mind the distraction of their maneuver to everyone else at worship. The reason they left was that the other church in town, the Missouri Synod Lutheran Church, got out of service thirty minutes earlier than we did. As a kid, Bruggemann often wondered how often Mr. G had looked at his watch during the service to be sure he left on time to receive Lutheran trade and Lutheran money.
Brueggemann writes, “I did not know the phrase at the time, but Mr. G was multitasking. He was worshipping, even while he kept an eye on the clock for the sake of trade and profit.”

Which brings us to the prophet Amos. Apparently, there’s some pretty insidious clock-watching going on in the Sabbath worship of Amos’s time. “When will this service end? When will the Sabbath be over? We need to get back to ripping off our neighbors.” What are they doing? Messing with the measurements for grain so people pay more than they should for less. The result? The people are oppressed, the poor are sold for silver, the needy for a pair of sandals, and God is disgusted. Amos, like other prophets such as Micah, Jeremiah, Isaiah, all rail against such practices as acts of idolatry. The Sabbath is supposed to be the great equalizer, but instead they tap their feet with impatience in the service, checking their watches.

Brueggemann says they are multi-tasking. He traces the practices back to the example and influence of Solomon, who built the Temple of God in an act of what Brueggemann calls “commodity restlessness.” Everything in the Temple is made from gold, opulent furnishings, endless amounts of fine jewelry, all meant to impress, but all driven by the belief that having more would generate well-being. Brueggemann also describes Solomon as an avid collector of women, known for his many wives, who seem to have become commodities to him as well. But there is a straight line between this opulence and the fiery critique of the prophets, who believed that the people had forsaken the Sabbath to multitask. In some instances, the critique is directed right at worship and Sabbath practice: “I hate your festivals,” says the Lord, “Your incense offerings are repulsive to me.” Why? Because your worship does not align with your living, your Sabbath is spent restless preparing to prey on the people.

Let me be clear. I like starting and ending worship on time. In fact, I saw someone post a photo of Megan Rapinoe after she scored a goal against France, spreading her arms wide, and say, “Me when service ends right at noon.” I’m really holding it together walking out on Sunday if we are right on time and not saying, “See, that’s how it’s done…” So I appreciate timeliness. But it is kind of like money. It’s all fine and good until we start worshipping it. How was worship today? Perfect. We walked out at 11:59 a.m.

And I believe that trade, business, the making of money, building wealth, all of it can be and often is a good thing, a way we are able to be blessed, and much more importantly, be a blessing to others. It seems to be not so much the money itself, but the worship of it, the placing of wealth at the center of our living, the serving of mammon, as Jesus says it. You cannot serve two masters. You cannot serve God and wealth.
The restlessness and clock-watching on the Sabbath, the desire to accumulate more and more, the endless seeking after advantage, none of it is helping us. The prophet’s critique is not for the sake of judgment, but to help open our eyes. God seeks not our destruction, but our salvation. The invitation comes to us this day in love from the mouth of Jesus, “Do not be anxious.”

A few years ago the Harvard Business Review made a place with a significant study that concluded while most of us believe multitasking helps us be more productive, it is often the opposite.

“We feel overwhelmed but also productive, pleased with our ability to juggle so many things. In reality, however, that sort of behavior makes us less effective in our jobs and our lives. Based on over a half-century of cognitive science and more recent studies on multitasking, we know that multitaskers do less and miss information. It takes time (an average of 15 minutes) to re-orient to a primary task after a distraction such as an email. Efficiency can drop by as much as 40%. Long-term memory suffers and creativity — a skill associated with keeping in mind multiple, less common, associations — is reduced. We have a brain with billions of neurons and many trillion of connections, but we seem incapable of doing multiple things at the same time. Sadly, multitasking does not exist, at least not as we think about it. We instead switch tasks.

The study goes on to make other statements that could have been on the lips of Amos or Jesus:

“Remote distractions, the ones aided by technology, are often unaware of current demands on us. People who call you at work, send you emails, or fire off texts can’t see how busy you are with your current task. Nor can Twitter feeds or email alerts. As a result, every communication is an important one that interrupts you.

“Also, we crave access to more information because it makes us comfortable. People tend to search for information that confirms what they already believe. Multiple sources of confirmation increase our confidence in our choices. Paradoxically, more information also leads to discomfort, because some of it might be conflicting. As a result, we then search for more confirmatory information.”

Anxiety breeds restlessness, in other words, which causes more distraction as we cast about for the rest that is elusive because of our anxious hearts.

Of course, the Harvard Business Review does not use the word Sabbath, but it is there between the lines. Do one task at a time, they advise. Learn the art of closing your
door, both your literal door and the door to your time that is often wide open to email and text and phone call. Close the door when you need to focus. And finally, prioritize information. Admit that not all of it is useful and is not worthy of interrupting you.

It seems there are those right in the heart of the business world who have recognized the value of focus, of the one thing most needful. How much more do we need then to hear the ancient invitation to Sabbath rest, to this day of worship in which we, with God’s help, focus on the one thing most needful, on the God who summons us to rest and the kind of deep holiness of living that comes from it, free from anxiety, free for God and neighbor.

As our nation pauses this week to celebrate our independence, I pray that those of us who claim the name of Christ, who worship the God of the prophets, will receive it as an invitation to pause and reflect on the object of our worship. Not all will see the celebration as a holy Sabbath pause, but we can. We can, with God’s help, take the time to be with God and one another in ways that will spark reflection on who we are as a people and who we are called to be together. Surely such reflection will be a source of blessing for the nation.

So, the invitation is there for us. We don’t have to watch the clock. We do not have to be ruled by wealth, consumed by anxiety. God has granted us freedom. Let us walk in the light of that gift, in peace and abundance, all our days. Amen.