
**President's Address
Winter Commencement
December 14, 2012**



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The writer of Genesis immediately gets down to the business.

It takes just 30 verses or so in the first chapter to cover the whole of creation—light introduced where there had been only darkness, water on previously dry land which gives birth to plants with vegetables and fruits, animals who live on the plants, birds who fly in the air, fish who swim in the seas, and finally people created in God's likeness.

That's pretty much it in these first 30 verses, except for one small thing. Almost as an afterthought, the writer notes that when the creation was finished God stopped and rested.

This is very similar to Jesus' birth story told in the second chapter of Luke's gospel.

It takes Luke just 20 short verses to introduce a decree from Emperor Augustus, a journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem, the birth of a baby, and an announcement that startles shepherds in the middle of the night and sends them rushing off to find "the child lying in the manger."

That's pretty much it in those 20 verses, except for one small thing. Almost as an afterthought, Luke notes that Mary "ponders" all of this in her heart.

Have you ever wondered why God chose to stop on the seventh day of the creation narrative, or why Mary paused to ponder after the shepherds left the manger?

Why stop? Why ponder? Why not just keep creating? Why not just start raising the little one?

Luke doesn't answer my questions, but the writer of Genesis does. And since these are both creation stories, perhaps what is true for one might be true for the other as well.

Earlier this year I read a book by Judith Shulevitz, a short work she titles *The Sabbath World: Glimpses of a Different Order of Time*. Near the end of her book she asks, then answers, my question:

Consider the mystery surrounding God's first Sabbath. Why did God stop, anyway? . . . God stopped to show us that what we create becomes

meaningful only once we stop creating it and start remembering why it was worth creating in the first place.

Here we have it. Why did God choose to rest on the seventh day of creation? To hallow it; to claim the act of creation as holy, and to claim as holy all that had been created.

Why did Mary choose to stop after the birth of Jesus and the visit by the shepherds? I think for the very same reason: to hallow the birth; to claim the birth of this infant as holy, to claim as holy all births of boys and girls before this time, and forever after.

Which brings us to this moment in your life.

Why stop? Why not just keep learning?

Why pause at the end of your degree, with friends and family gathered around? Why not just go home, and simply say, "Well family, I finished," and then get on to work . . . which is exactly what everyone in your family wants you to do.

Why stop to throw this big party with all your classmates?

For this very reason: On this night we stop, ever so briefly, to mark learning, to mark life as a student, as holy. We stop to ponder, we stop to remember, we stop to claim the act of learning as holy, and to claim as holy all you have learned.

We're gathered to declare holy

- . . . your first course, your last course, and every course between.
- . . . the exams you almost failed (and there were likely a few of these) as well as the tests and papers on which you excelled.
- . . . the content you've already forgotten, along with all you still remember.
- . . . the friendships you've formed for a life-time, along with the hurt of a relationship now broken.
- . . . the cheers of Foster's Finest and the antics the Carlson Crazies.
- . . . the adventure of travel abroad and the commute to school after a day at work followed by a late-night journey home.
- . . . the making of music with the choir, the imagination lived out on the stage, the competition of Viking athletics.

- . . . who you were when you first enrolled at North Park, who you are on this night of graduation, and who you will become in the years that follow.

How do we declare these things to be holy? By stopping, by pausing, to remember. To paraphrase Judith Shulevitz: We stop to acknowledge that what we learn becomes meaningful only once we stop learning it and start remembering why it was worth learning in the first place.

This is a sacred moment in your life, even as each day of the past years of learning at North Park has been a holy time. This is a night to remember, a night to mark learning as holy.

Now pray with me:

Eternal God, you have filled our world, and especially the lives of each graduate, with beauty and wonder. Open our eyes tonight to behold your gracious hand in all your works among us, but especially in the privilege of learning granted so generously to these wonderful graduates. Prompt us this night to mark as holy the dedicated labor of learning undertaken in the company of fellow-learners here at North Park University.

Now mark as holy each one of these graduates to live with significance in service. Grant them each day the grace to ask what you would have them do, that in your light they may see light and in your straight path may not stumble.

Through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.