



WENDELL BERRY  
and the  
SABBATH POETRY  
of LENT

# INTRODUCTION



The whole earth is at rest,  
and is quiet: they break forth  
into singing. + Isaiah 14:7

The word “Lent” comes from an old English word for “lengthen,” and refers to the lengthening days of spring. Anticipating Easter, the church prepares with forty days of fasting and reflection, the better to celebrate the great feast when it comes.

The word “sabbath” comes from an old Hebrew word for “to stop,” and refers to pausing secondary activities (like work) to clear space for the primary ones (like relationships, delight, study, freedom, beauty, restoration – and resurrection). The poet Wendell Berry calls “the idea of sabbath...as rich and demanding an idea as any I know” – and over the decades, Berry has devoted many Sundays to writing “sabbath poems” that explore the depths of this rich, demanding idea.

In this Lenten devotional, biblical texts walk hand-in-hand with Berry’s sabbath vision of the natural world, and together they suggest simple, accessible practices you can try yourself, with your family or friends, or with your congregation.

All you’ll need is your favorite Bible and Wendell Berry’s *This Day: Collected and New Sabbath Poems* (the poems may also be found online). Week by week, as the light continues to lengthen, we’ll walk through the woods together toward Easter morning, keeping sabbath as we go.

# A LITTLE PRIMER on Sabbath

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At its heart, sabbath keeping is an ancient technology of health, dignity, and joy. The idea is to enter into God's symphonic, sevenfold rhythm: every seventh day is a sabbath day; every seventh year is a sabbath year; and every seventh sabbath year (plus one) is a Jubilee year of restoration and renewal, a kind of sabbath writ large, in which the land rests, enslaved people are freed, and debts are forgiven (Leviticus 25:8-12; Exodus 21:2; Exodus 23:10-11; Deuteronomy 15).

Indeed, when Jesus proclaims "the year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4:19), he's invoking this Jubilee tradition, casting the Reign of God's arrival as a Great Jubilee of Jubilees, a Sabbath of Sabbaths. In this way, the weekly sabbath, the Sabbatical Year, the Jubilee Year, and at the widest scale, the Reign of God itself each participate in this symphony of nested sevens, all for the sake of health: personal health, familial health, societal health, and the health of creation. Recalling that the root of the word "salvation" is the Latin *salvus* ("health"), we can put the point this way: the rhythm of the sabbath is the rhythm of salvation.

The smallest of these nested circles, then, the weekly sabbath, is a frequent, down-to-earth way to tap into the cosmic, revolutionary spirit of Jubilee. Accordingly, God calls us – commands us! – to observe the sabbath day and keep it holy. In the Book of Exodus, the practice is framed as an imitation of God, the Divine Artist who rests on the seventh day of creation as if pausing to savor the sheer goodness of the world (Exodus 20:8-11; Genesis 1:31). Understood through this lens, the sabbath is a day for delight, for participating in God's ongoing joy in creation. If we refrain from certain activities during the sabbath, we do so precisely in order to make room for this enjoyment.

And in Deuteronomy's version of the sabbath commandment, the emphasis falls on remembering the exodus from slavery in Egypt (Deuteronomy 5:12-15). Like a "little exodus" every week, keeping the sabbath releases us from the bondage of toil and busyness, reminding us of the divine deliverance at the heart of our lives ("you were enslaved in the land of Egypt"). At the



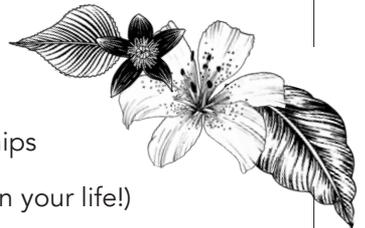
same time, it provides a foretaste of the Promised Land, the “milk and honey” toward which salvation history moves.

And not just for supposed insiders: note how the sabbath’s benefits were for everyone in Israelite society, including “resident foreigners,” men and women, and so on (Deut 5:14). The sabbath is for everyone; it “was made for humankind,” as Jesus puts it (Mark 2:27). It’s meant to help us thrive, personally and communally, and its spirit embraces the whole neighborhood, including all of God’s creatures (“ox, donkey, livestock,” and so on; Deut 5:14). In short, sabbath keeping is for rest and restoration, for experiencing and cultivating the deep, abiding goodness of God and the world God has made.

Each sabbath day, then, should be a “little exodus” and a “little jubilee,” both a reminder and a foretaste of the Great Exodus and the Great Jubilee for which we all work, and wait, and call. The rhythm of the sabbath is the rhythm of salvation. To spend the forty days of Lent strengthening our sabbath keeping – with both scripture and Wendell Berry’s sabbath poems as our guides – is a perfect way to prepare for the joy and light of Easter morning.

## 7 SIGNS YOU NEED MORE SABBATH IN YOUR LIFE

- #1 You don’t have time for it
- #2 You want to strengthen your relationships
- #3 You need more joy in your week (and in your life!)
- #4 You want to participate in God’s sevenfold Spirit of Jubilee
- #5 You feel fragmented, frenzied, or stressed
- #6 You can’t recall the last time you and your loved ones really “rested”
- #7 And hey, it’s in the Ten Commandments (right up there with “Thou shalt not murder”!)



# Ash WEDNESDAY

## READ

### Scripture

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

### Sabbath Poem

VII, 1994, "I would not have been a poet" (p.20)

BUT WHEN YOU GIVE  
ALMS, DO NOT LET  
YOUR LEFT HAND KNOW  
WHAT YOUR RIGHT  
HAND IS DOING...

+ Matthew 6:3



## MEDITATE

Jesus challenges us to give, pray, fast, and value in ways that aren't paraded out in public for all to see, but rather take place "in secret" – hidden even from ourselves ("do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing"). Jesus' repeated emphasis here points to something essential about genuine love: it bubbles up from our innermost heart, not from any desire to impress or acquire status. Berry puts it this way: "The way of love leads all ways / to life beyond words, silent / and secret. To serve that triumph / I have done all the rest."

## MORE LIGHT

Pair Jesus' instruction on "treasures" in this passage with Berry's XIII, 2008, "By its own logic, greed" (p. 36); and Jesus' overall portrait of quiet, unassuming generosity with Berry's II, 1999, "I dream of a quiet man" (p. 37).

## PRACTICES

- † This week begin each day by lighting a candle of silence, cover your eyes for a few seconds, open your eyes to God's transformed world, and pray, "God of quiet love, turn me away from wordiness and things and toward your silence, grace, and restoration."



- † Create intentional times of solitude and silence this week, opportunities to commune and connect with God “in secret” – and notice the serenity this practice can bring.
- † Choose a day (or a part of a day!) that will serve as your weekly sabbath during Lent. Sunday is a classic option, of course, but Saturday works, too. Jews observe the Sabbath from sundown Friday to sundown Saturday. And others set aside a section of a day each week (say, an evening, or an early morning). Whatever time frame you choose, try following these “10 Tips for a Good Sabbath.”
- † What role does “impressing other people” or “acquiring status” play in your everyday life? How would your life change if these dynamics didn’t play any role at all?

## 10 TIPS FOR A GOOD SABBATH

- #1 Unplug
- #2 Connect with people you love
- #3 Get out into creation
- #4 Avoid buying and selling
- #5 Light candles
- #6 Enjoy simple, delicious food
- #7 Make some music (sing!)
- #8 Make some silence
- #9 Make beautiful conversation
- #10 End with gratitude - and go to bed early!

BONUS: Refrain from arguing, gossiping, and problem-solving



# FIRST SUNDAY of LENT

## READ

### Scripture

Matthew 4:1-11

### Sabbath Poem

I, 1979, "I go among trees and sit still" (p. 21).



THEN JESUS WAS LED UP  
BY THE SPIRIT INTO THE  
WILDERNESS...

+ Matthew 4:1

## MEDITATE

Jesus' temptations in the wilderness all come down to fear and trust, and the scriptures Jesus cites in response all point to the ancient Israelites trusting God in their wilderness wanderings. What fears have you in their grips today? What temptations, what distrusts do they provoke? And how might times of Sabbath stillness, like Berry's in this poem, help us learn to trust, take courage, and sing?

## MORE LIGHT

For another wilderness odyssey that resonates with Jesus', see Berry's poem about Jacob, I, 2004, "A young man leaving home" (p. 37); and pair this week's other lectionary reading (Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7) with Berry's IV, 1979, "The bell calls in the town" (p. 38).

## PRACTICES

- † This week begin each day by lighting a candle of trust, cover your eyes for a few seconds, open your eyes to God's transformed world, and pray, "God of faithfulness, help me trust in you; let me hear again the song you have given me, and help me sing it."

- † Go among the trees and sit still. Listen for how God may be calling you to take courage in new ways.
- † Experiment with journaling this week. What fears do you need to let go of? What in your life would change if you more deeply trusted in God's graceful love?

## SECOND SUNDAY of LENT

### READ

#### *Scripture*

John 3:1-17

#### *Sabbath Poem*

VII, 1999, "Again I resume the long" (p.22)

FOR GOD SO LOVED THE WORLD...

+ John 3:16



### MEDITATE

Despite our injustice, cruelty, and contempt, Jesus comes "not to condemn the world," but to save it (John 3:17). It's worth noting that the most famous verse in this passage doesn't say, "For God so loved the Christians," or even "For God so loved the humans," but rather "For God so loved the world." This profound affection for creation is what Berry has in mind when he imagines the divine pleasure – call it, "sabbatical pleasure" – in "even the slightest" of God's works.

### MORE LIGHT

For more on the links between love, joy, and rest, see Berry's XII, 2007, "Learn by little the desire for all things" (p. 41); and for a brief reflection on "eternity" that illuminates the "eternal life" at the heart of John 3:15-17, see Berry's XIII, 2005, "Eternity is not infinity" (p. 41).

# PRACTICES

- † This week begin each day by lighting a candle of delight, cover your eyes for a few seconds, open your eyes to God's transformed world, and pray, "God of grace, help me love the world the way you love the world, taking delight in even the slightest of your works."
- † Experiment with creating little pockets of Sabbath time this week, tucked in here and there. A silent walk after lunch, an early morning cup of tea, a mealtime "Sabbath sleeping bag" for cell phones or other devices – anything that helps you reconnect with God's blessings.
- † One way to love the world is to help repair it. Devote some time this week to learning more about an inspiring local organization doing works of mercy and justice, and find out how you can get involved and lend a hand.
- † Remembering God's delight in the slightest works, make a list of your favorite little delights (the sunlight's slant in the late afternoon, your dog's ears, the steam rising from your coffee – no delight is too slight!). Read your lists out loud in person with your family, or online with family and friends. Which little delights are on the top of their lists?

**BONUS PRACTICE:** Whether it's cleaning the toilets, washing dishes, or doing laundry day after day, housework never ends! So this Lenten season, do yourself a favor and ignore it – yes, ignore it! – for one entire day each week. And if you need some convincing, re-read the story of Mary and Martha (Luke 10:38-42), decide not to worry, and choose the better part!



# THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT

READ

*Scripture*

John 4:5-42



WHERE DO YOU GET  
THAT LIVING WATER?

+ John 4:7

*Sabbath Poem*

V, 1985, "How long does it take to make the woods?" (p. 23)

MEDITATE

The water Jesus offers, he says, quenches a need even deeper than physical thirst: "The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life" (John 4:14). What would it feel like to have that deep thirst quenched? And as the Samaritan woman asks Jesus, where do we get such "living water"? For Berry, the woods are a kind of living icon for "eternal life," and the Sabbath is a way to taste that life here and now: "To come in among these trees you must leave behind / the six days' world, all of it, all of its plans and hopes."

MORE LIGHT

For more on the benefits of engaging creation, see Berry's I, 1981, "Here where the world is being made" (p. 42); and for insight on how "eternal life" is related to everyday life, see Berry's VIII, 1999, "The difference is a polished" (p. 43).

PRACTICES

- † This week begin each day by lighting a candle of care, cover your eyes for a few seconds, open your eyes to God's transformed world, and pray, "God of all creation, help me live today in ways that consecrate, protect, and honor the world you have made."

- † Try taking one or two more steps this week toward caring for creation – and fasting from activities that do the opposite. Enjoy vegetarian or vegan meals this week; walk or bike to the grocery store; hang-dry your laundry, or use wool dryer balls in your dryer (they reduce drying time by up to 50%).
- † Write a letter to your political representatives advocating for action on the climate crisis, or get involved with environmental advocacy group.
- † Where are the places in creation that serve as living icons for you, places where you sense “a spring of water gushing up to eternal life”?



## — FOURTH SUNDAY of LENT —

### READ

#### Scripture

John 9:1-41

#### Sabbath Poem

“Remembering that it happened once” (p. 24)

NOW IT WAS A SABBATH  
DAY WHEN JESUS MADE  
THE MUD AND OPENED  
HIS EYES.

+ John 9:14



### MEDITATE

Ostensibly a story about Jesus restoring physical sight, this is also a story about restoring spiritual sight – as well as our tendency to overlook God’s grace, even when it’s right in front of us. For Jesus, the Sabbath is a time of healing and restoration. And for Berry, insight can strike even and especially in the midst of our ordinary routines, when we find ourselves “here / As we have never been before, / Sighted as not before, our place / Holy, although we knew it not.”

# MORE LIGHT

For meditations on three obstacles to seeing clearly – distraction, impatience, and camouflage – see Berry’s I, 1987, “Coming to the woods’ edge”; V, 1980, “Six days of work are spent”; and IV, 1980, “The frog with lichened back and golden thigh” (pp. 43, 45, 46).

## PRACTICES

- † This week begin each day by lighting a candle of insight, cover your eyes for a few seconds, open your eyes to God’s transformed world, and pray, “God of wisdom, help me to see your grace more clearly, around us, among us, and within us.”
- † Take a neighborhood walk – and count how many shades of green you can see, or how many colors of flowers are in bloom. In the same spirit, on a clear night this week, take a walk and enjoy the stars (bring binoculars or a telescope along if you can). A magnificent starry sky can make us feel small in a good way; can looking at a crocus have the same effect?
- † Pick a creature in God’s creation that’s typically hidden out of sight (a bobcat, an owl, a mushroom, or a deep sea fish). Do a little research, and share what you learn with at least one other person, or post it for the world to enjoy.
- † Where in your ordinary, daily routine do you experience God’s healing or revealing grace? What obstacles obscure your vision? Explore this question over tea with your family, or online with friends and family.



# FIFTH SUNDAY of LENT

## READ

### Scripture

John 11:1-45

### Sabbath Poem

I, 1980, "What hard travail  
God does in death!" (p. 25)



JESUS SAID TO  
THEM, "UNBIND HIM,  
AND LET HIM GO!"

+ John 11:44

## MEDITATE

Jesus raises Lazarus in this story – but the key line is what he says to Martha: "I am the resurrection and the life" (John 11:25). Resurrection isn't just something Jesus does, or something he makes happen for Lazarus. Resurrection is part and parcel of who Jesus is. Like new wildflowers springing up through the decay on a forest floor, Jesus' signature move is resurgence, renaissance, resurrection. No bonds of death can hold him. Berry puts it this way: "He rests in rising."

## MORE LIGHT

For two meditations on death, loss, and new life, see Berry's VI, 1985, "Life forgives its depredations," and III, 1987, "And now the lowland grove is down, the trees" (pp. 47, 47).

## PRACTICES

- † This week begin each day by lighting a candle of resurrection, cover your eyes for a few seconds, open your eyes to God's transformed world, and pray, "God of new life, help me be a part of your resurrecting work: life in the midst of death, hope in the midst of struggle, and rising in the midst of toil."

- † On your walk this week, intentionally look for signs of resurrection, new life breaking into the world – not only among flowers and trees and non-human animals, but also in human communities, too (new businesses, for instance). Share your discoveries on Facebook or Instagram.
- † Experiment with a “life-giving fast,” refraining from activities that drain or destroy: divisive conversation, for example, or unhealthy habits – and channel your energy toward what brings you alive: exercise, nutritious food, caring relationships, generosity.
- † When Lazarus emerges from the tomb, he’s still wrapped in bandages of death – and Jesus commands that he be “unbound and let go.” What resurrection is currently in process in your life? What bonds are still holding you back? Explore these questions with someone you love.




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## PALM SUNDAY

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READ

*Scripture*

Matthew 21:1-11

*Sabbath Poem*

I, 1986, “Slowly, slowly, they return” (p. 26)



**“BLESSED IS THE ONE  
WHO COMES IN THE  
NAME OF THE LORD!”**

+ Matthew 21:9

# MEDITATE

Entering Jerusalem with a kind of street theater, Jesus enacts a passage from the ancient prophet Zechariah – and the crowds join in, singing songs of praise for the triumphant king, “humble and riding on a donkey” (Zechariah 9:9). For Berry, creation itself resounds in praise: a woodland is “a timbered choir / Stout beams upholding weightless grace / Of song, a blessing on this place.” Indeed, as Jesus puts it in Luke’s version of the story, if we were to fall silent, “the stones would shout out” their own doxology (Luke 19:40).

# MORE LIGHT

For a deeper dive into the doxology of creation, see Berry’s IV, 2012, “It’s spring. The birds sing,” and VIII, 2011, “Off in the woods in the quiet” (pp. 48, 49).

# PRACTICES

- † This week begin each day by lighting a candle of joy, cover your eyes for a few seconds, open your eyes to God’s transformed world, and pray, “God of glory, God of grace, help me praise you today in all I do and say.”
- † Sabbath is a time of joy and praise. Give each member of your family a handwritten note of appreciation this week, or pop a few “thank you” notes in the mail for more distant friends and family.
- † Following Berry’s lead, what in the natural world – what landscapes, what creatures – strike you most as praising God? And in turn, what makes your heart sing? Explore these questions in a journal, or discuss them in person or online with family or friends.



# MAUNDY THURSDAY

## READ

### Scripture

John 13:1-7, 31-35

### Sabbath Poem

VIII, 2012, "Since, despite the stern demands" (p. 27)



THEN HE Poured WATER  
INTO A BASIN AND BEGAN  
TO WASH THE DISCIPLES'  
FEET AND TO WIPE THEM  
WITH THE TOWEL THAT  
WAS TIED AROUND HIM.

+ John 13:5

## MEDITATE

Foot-washing tangibly illustrates Jesus' new commandment to "love one another, as I have loved you" ("Maundy" is from an old word for "mandate" or command). Likewise, Berry calls for "kindness bespeaking kinship," taking birds and flowers as inspiring role models, both "humble and beautiful."

## MORE LIGHT

Later tonight, Jesus will pray – and struggle – in the Garden of Gethsemane; pair that story with Berry's III, 2012, "Though his tenure on the earth" (p. 50).

## PRACTICES

- † Today light a candle of love, cover your eyes for a few seconds, open your eyes to God's transformed world, and pray, "God of love, help us love one another as as you have loved us – and help us learn from your creatures how to love."
- † The Sabbath isn't only for humankind; it's for plants and other animals, too. Research a creature in God's creation – a bird, a flower, or something else entirely – that inspires you to love more simply,

tangibly, and clearly. Share what you learn with at least one other person, or post it for others to enjoy.

- † Wash the hands or feet of a family member; plant or care for a bed of flowers; or put a birdbath out for your fine feathered friends.
- † How can we learn from other creatures? Which creatures inspire you the most? For example, many songbirds migrate thousands of miles each spring, traveling by night to avoid hawks and navigate by the stars. What helps you make your way through the shadows? Explore these questions in a journal, or discuss them with someone you love.



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## GOOD FRIDAY

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### READ

#### Scripture

John 18:1-19:42

#### Sabbath Poem

II, 1988, "It is the destruction of the world" (p. 28)

SO THEY TOOK JESUS: AND  
CARRYING THE CROSS BY  
HIMSELF. HE WENT OUT TO  
WHAT IS CALLED THE PLACE OF  
THE SKULL. WHICH IN HEBREW  
IS CALLED GOLGOTHA.

+ John 19:16-17

### MEDITATE

The story of Jesus' passion is about many things – betrayal, violence, death, love, mercy, redemption – but at its core, it's also about grief. The grief of Jesus' disciples. The grief of Mary, watching her son shamed and desecrated. And if we look not only "at" but also "through" the cross, we can glimpse the grief of oppressed people in all times and places, the

heartbreak that comes when all seems lost. And the grief of perpetrators, too, we who, as Berry puts it, “destroy that which we were given / in trust.” If we listen closely, this story may evoke “the presence / in our very bodies of our grief” – so we can name it, and feel it, and face it.

## MORE LIGHT

Pair these readings with Berry’s IV, 1993, “Hate has no world,” and I, 1989, “In early morning we awaken from” (pp. 51, 51).

## PRACTICES

- † Today light a candle of sorrow, cover your eyes for a few seconds, open your eyes to God’s transformed world, and pray, “God of mercy, forgive us. We have destroyed what we were given in trust. Help us to heal, and change, and begin again.”
- † Reach out to someone awash in grief or sorrow – if only to let them know you’re thinking about them.
- † What grief does this story evoke in you? How can it open our hearts to grief in the world around us, including grief over the destruction of creation? Explore these questions in a journal, or discuss them in person or online with family or friends.

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# EASTER SUNDAY

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## READ

### Scripture

Matthew 28:1-10

### Sabbath Poems

In honor of the Easter feast, here are seven Sabbath poems. Read them all today (they’re brief), or spread them out across the upcoming seven weeks of Eastertide.



AFTER THE SABBATH.  
AS THE FIRST DAY  
OF THE WEEK WAS  
DAWNING. MARY  
MAGDALENE AND THE  
OTHER MARY WENT  
TO SEE THE TOMB.

+ Matthew 28:1

I, 2009, "Early in the year by my friend's gift" (p. 29)

Pair this poem with an online image of Piero della Francesca's famous fresco, *The Resurrection*

III, 2009, "After windstorm and ice storm" (p. 30)

A beautiful meditation on how "the world is saved by tenderness"

III, 1992, "Again we come" (p. 31)

A vivid, humble picture of resurrection in creation

IV, 2003, "The little stream sings" (p. 31)

A poem Berry wrote on Easter morning

V, 2003, "The politics of illusion, of death's money" (p. 32)

In eight lines, the whole journey: Good Friday to Easter Sunday

V, 1994, "Raking hay on a rough slope" (p. 33)

A lovely meditation on how one moment - say, Easter morning - can become, in memory, a pivot around which a life can turn

VII, 1982, "The clearing rests in song and shade" (p. 34)

Easter's call to action: "O dust, arise!"



Jesus is risen – hallelujah! The light has lengthened into morning. The new life of spring has arrived. The forty days of Lent now give way to the fifty-day festival of Eastertide, itself about one seventh of the year – another entryway into the sevenfold, sabbatical rhythm of salvation.

**OBSERVE THE SABBATH DAY.  
AND KEEP IT HOLY.**

*O dust, arise!*

# “I would not have been a poet”

I would not have been a poet  
except that I have been in love  
alive in this mortal world,  
or an essayist except that I  
have been bewildered and afraid,  
or a storyteller had I not heard  
stories passing to me through the air,  
or a writer at all except  
I have been wakeful at night  
and words have come to me  
out of their deep caves,  
needing to be remembered.  
But on the days I am lucky  
or blessed, I am silent.  
I go into the one body  
that two make in making marriage  
that for all our trying, all  
our deaf-and-dumb of speech,  
has no tongue. Or I give myself  
to gravity, light, and air  
and am carried back  
to solitary work in fields  
and woods, where my hands  
rest upon a world unnamed,  
complete, unanswerable, and final  
as our daily bread and meat.  
The way of love leads all ways  
to life beyond words, silent  
and secret. To serve that triumph  
I have done all the rest.

*This Day: Sabbath Poems, 1994: VII – Wendell Berry*

----- FIRST SUNDAY of LENT -----

# "I go among trees and sit still"

I go among trees and sit still.  
All my stirring becomes quiet  
around me like circles on water.  
My tasks lie in their places  
where I left them, asleep like cattle.

Then what is afraid of me comes  
and lives a while in my sight.  
What it fears in me leaves me,  
and the fear of me leaves it.  
It sings, and I hear its song.

Then what I am afraid of comes.  
I live for a while in its sight.  
What I fear in it leaves it,  
and the fear of it leaves me.  
It sings, and I hear its song.

After days of labor,  
mute in my consternations,  
I hear my song at last,  
and I sing it. As we sing,  
the day turns, the trees move.

*This Day: Sabbath Poems, 1979: I – Wendell Berry*

# "Again I resume the long"

Again I resume the long  
lesson: how small a thing  
can be pleasing, how little  
in this hard world it takes  
to satisfy the mind  
and bring it to its rest.

With the ongoing havoc  
the woods this morning is  
almost unnaturally still.  
Through stalled air, unshadowed  
light, a few leaves fall  
of their own weight.

The sky  
is gray. It begins in mist  
almost at the ground  
and rises forever. The trees  
rise in silence almost  
natural, but not quite,  
almost eternal, but  
not quite.

What more did I  
think I wanted? Here is  
what has always been.  
Here is what will always  
be. Even in me,  
the Maker of all this  
returns in rest, even  
to the slightest of His works,  
a yellow leaf slowly  
falling, and is pleased.

*This Day: Sabbath Poems, 1999: VII – Wendell Berry*

# “How long does it take to make the woods?”

How long does it take to make the woods?

As long as it takes to make the world.

The woods is present as the world is, the presence of all its past and of all its time to come.

It is always finished, it is always being made, the act of its making forever greater than the act of its destruction.

It is a part of eternity for its end and beginning belong to the end and beginning of all things, the beginning lost in the end, the end in the beginning.

What is the way to the woods, how do you go there?

By climbing up through the six days' field,

kept in all the body's years, the body's

sorrow, weariness, and joy. By passing through

the narrow gate on the far side of that field

where the pasture grass of the body's life gives way

to the high, original standing of the trees.

By coming into the shadow, the shadow

of the grace of the strait way's ending,

the shadow of the mercy of light.

Why must the gate be narrow?

Because you cannot pass beyond it burdened.

To come into the woods you must leave behind

the six days' world, all of it, all of its plans and hopes.

You must come without weapon or tool, alone,

expecting nothing, remembering nothing,

into the ease of sight, the brotherhood of eye and leaf.

*This Day: Sabbath Poems, 1985: V – Wendell Berry*

---- FOURTH SUNDAY of LENT ----

# “Remembering that it happened once”

Remembering that it happened once,  
We cannot turn away the thought,  
As we go out, cold, to our barns  
Toward the long night's end, that we  
Ourselves are living in the world  
It happened in when it first happened,  
That we ourselves, opening a stall  
(A latch thrown open countless times  
Before), might find them breathing there,  
Foreknown: the Child bedded in straw,  
The mother kneeling over Him,  
The husband standing in belief  
He scarcely can believe, in light  
That lights them from no source we see,  
An April morning's light, the air  
Around them joyful as a choir.  
We stand with one hand on the door,  
Looking into another world  
That is this world, the pale daylight  
Coming just as before, our chores  
To do, the cattle all awake,  
Our own white frozen breath hanging  
In front of us; and we are here  
As we have never been before,  
Sighted as not before, our place  
Holy, although we knew it not.

*This Day: Sabbath Poems, 1987: VI – Wendell Berry*

----- FIFTH SUNDAY of LENT -----

# “What hard travail God does in death!”

What hard travail God does in death!  
He strives in sleep, in our despair,  
And all flesh shudders underneath  
The nightmare of His sepulcher.

The earth shakes, grinding its deep stone;  
All night the cold wind heaves and pries;  
Creation strains sinew and bone  
Against the dark door where He lies.

The stem bent, pent in seed, grow straight  
And stands. Pain breaks in song. Surprising  
The merely dead, graves fill with light  
Like opened eyes. He rests in rising.

*This Day: Sabbath Poems, 1980: I – Wendell Berry*



----- PALM SUNDAY -----

# "Slowly, slowly, they return"

Slowly, slowly, they return  
To the small woodland let alone:  
Great trees, outspreading and upright,  
Apostles of the living light.

Patient as stars, they build in air  
Tier after tier a timbered choir,  
Stout beams upholding weightless grace  
Of song, a blessing on this place.

They stand in waiting all around,  
Uprisings of their native ground,  
Downcomings of the distant light;  
They are the advent they await.

Receiving sun and giving shade,  
Their life's a benefaction made,  
And is a benediction said  
Over the living and the dead.

In fall their brightened leaves, released,  
Fly down the wind, and we are pleased  
To walk on radiance, amazed.  
O light come down to earth, be praised!

*This Day: Sabbath Poems, 1986: I – Wendell Berry*



----- MAUNDY THURSDAY -----

“Since, despite the stern demands”

Since, despite the stern demands  
of scientist and realist, we will always  
be supposing, let us suppose  
that Nature gave the world flowers  
and birdsong as a language, by which  
it might speak to discerning humans.  
And what must we say back? Not  
just thanks and praise, but acts  
of kindness bespeaking kinship  
with the creatures and with Nature, acts  
faithful as the woods that dwells in place  
time out of mind, self-denying  
as the parenthood of the birds, and like  
the flowers humble and beautiful.

*This Day: Sabbath Poems, 2012: VIII – Wendell Berry*

----- GOOD FRIDAY -----

# “It is the destruction of the world”

It is the destruction of the world  
in our own lives  
that drives us half insane, and more than half.  
To destroy that which we were given  
in trust: how will we bear it?  
It is our own bodies that we give  
to be broken,  
our bodies existing before and after us  
in clod and cloud, worm and tree,  
that we, driving or driven, despise  
in our greed to live, our haste  
to die. To have lost, wantonly,  
the ancient forests, the vast grasslands  
in our madness, the presence  
in our very bodies of our grief.

*This Day: Sabbath Poems, 1988: II – Wendell Berry*



## Seven Sabbath Poems for Eastertide

### “Early in the year by my friend’s gift”

*“Why seek ye the living among the dead?”*

Early in the year by my friend’s gift  
I saw at Sansepolcro Piero’s vision:  
The soldiers who guard the dead from the living  
themselves become as dead men, one  
tumbling dazedly backward. Awake, his wounds  
bleeding still, his foot upon the tomb, Christ  
who bore our life to its most wretched end,  
having thrust off like a blanket the heavy lid,  
stands. But for his face and countenance  
I have found no words: powerful beyond life  
and death, seeing beyond sight or light,  
beyond all triumph serene. All this Piero saw.  
And we who were sleeping, seeking the dead  
among the dead, dare to be awake. We who see  
see we are forever seen, by sight have been  
forever changed. The morning at last  
has come. The trees, once bare, are green.

*This Day: Sabbath Poems, 2009: 1 – Wendell Berry*

# “After windstorm and ice storm”

After wind storm and ice storm  
the woods floor is a maze  
of trunks and branches, heavy  
bodies brought violently down,  
which is the fate they stood for.  
In April now, after the cold  
and the blows, rising in the tangle  
so mightily shaken, broken, and fallen,  
in their turn come the small flowers,  
bluebell and rue anemone,  
larkspur and violet. In these,  
standing also in time to fall,  
shines the world's great tenderness,  
light and sight passingly touching  
like a kiss. Made no doubt by force,  
the world is saved by tenderness.  
After they fall, the fallen decay  
quietly by countless gentle acts.

*This Day: Sabbath Poems, 2009: III – Wendell Berry*

# “Again we come”

Again we come  
to the resurrection  
of bloodroot from the dark,

a hand that reaches up  
out of the ground,  
holding a lamp.

*This Day: Sabbath Poems, 1992: III – Wendell Berry*

# “The little stream sings”

The little stream sings  
in the crease of the hill.  
It is the water of life. It knows  
nothing of death, nothing.  
And this is the morning  
of Christ’s resurrection.  
The tomb is empty. There is  
no death. Death is our illusion,  
our wish to belong only  
to ourselves, which is our freedom  
to kill one another.  
From this sleep may we too  
rise, as out of the dark grave.

*This Day: Sabbath Poems, 2003: IV – Wendell Berry*



## “The politics of illusion, of death’s money”

The politics of illusion, of death’s money, possesses us. This is the Hell, this the nightmare into which Christ descended from the cross, from which also he woke and rose, striding godly forth, so free that He appeared to Mary Magdalene to be only the gardener walking about in the new day, among the flowers.

*This Day: Sabbath Poems, 2003: V – Wendell Berry*

# “Raking hay on a rough slope”

Raking hay on a rough slope,  
when I was about sixteen,  
I drove to the ridgetop and saw  
in a neighbor's field on the other side  
a pond in a swale, and around it  
the whole field filled  
with chicory in bloom, blue  
as the sky reflected in the pond—  
bluer even, and somehow lighter;  
though they belonged to gravity.  
They were the morning's  
blossoms and would not last.  
But I go back now in my mind  
to when I drew the long windrow  
to the top of the rise, and I see  
the blue-flowered field, holding  
in its center the sky-reflecting pond.  
It seems, as then, another world  
in this world, such as a pilgrim  
might travel days and years  
to find, and find at last  
on the morning of his return  
by his mere being at home  
awake—a moment seen, forever known.

*This Day: Sabbath Poems, 1994: V – Wendell Berry*

# “The clearing rests in song and shade”

The clearing rests in song and shade.  
It is a creature made  
By old light held in soil and leaf,  
By human joy and grief,  
By human work,  
Fidelity of sight and stroke,  
By rain, by water on  
The parent stone.

We join our work to Heaven's gift,  
Our hope to what is left,  
That field and woods at last agree  
In an economy  
Of widest worth.  
High Heaven's Kingdom come on earth.  
Imagine Paradise.  
O Dust, arise!

*This Day: Sabbath Poems, 1982: VII – Wendell Berry*

# SPECIAL EVENTS THIS SEASON



# The "MORE LIGHT" Poems



## "By its own logic, greed"

By its own logic, greed  
finally destroys itself,  
as Lear's wicked daughters  
learned to their horror, as  
we are learning to our own.  
What greed builds is built  
by destruction of the materials  
and lives of which it is built.  
Only mourners survive.  
This is the "creative destruction"  
of which learned economists  
speak in praise. But what is made  
by destruction comes down at last  
to a stable floor, a bed  
of straw, and for those with sight  
light in darkness.

*This Day: Sabbath Poems, 2008: XIII – Wendell Berry*

# “I dream of a quiet man”

I dream of a quiet man  
who explains nothing and defends  
nothing, but only knows  
where the rarest wildflowers  
are blooming, and who goes,  
and finds that he is smiling  
not by his own will.

*This Day: Sabbath Poems, 1999: II – Wendell Berry*

# “A young man leaving home”

*After the painting Jacob's Dream by William Blake and Genesis 28:11-17*

A young man leaving home  
For long years to be gone  
Might fall asleep and dream,  
His head upon a stone.

A stair appears that bends  
In spiral toward the light,  
The bright Orb where it ends,  
Though he sleeps through the night,

Darkened, below the stars.  
Angels in constant motion  
Walk up and down the stairs.  
Delight and clear devotion

Make graceful all they do.  
The light and dark are bound,  
Heaven to all below,  
Bright stair and stony ground

In one light joined. In sleep  
The dreamer wakes. He sees  
Above the stars the deep  
Of Heaven opened. Is

He living, then, his part  
Of Heaven's earthly life?

*This Day: Sabbath Poems, 2004: 1 – Wendell Berry*

## “The bell calls in the town”

The bell calls in the town  
Where forebears cleared the shaded land  
And brought high daylight down  
To shine on field and trodden road.  
I hear, but understand  
Contrarily, and walk into the woods.  
I leave labor and load,  
Take up a different story.  
I keep an inventory  
Of wonders and of uncommercial goods.

I climb up through the field  
That my long labor has kept clear.  
Projects, plans unfulfilled  
Waylay and snatch at me like briars,

For there is no rest here  
Where ceaseless effort seems to be required,  
Yet fails, and spirit tires  
With flesh, because failure  
And weariness are sure  
In all that mortal wishing has inspired.

I go in pilgrimage  
Across an old fenced boundary  
To wildness without age  
Where, in their long dominion,  
The trees have been left free.  
They call the soil here “Eden”—slants and steeps  
Hard to stand straight up on  
Even without a burden.  
No more a perfect garden,  
There’s an immortal memory that it keeps.

I leave work’s daily rule  
And come here to this restful place  
Where music stirs the pool  
And from high stations of the air  
Fall notes of wordless grace,  
Strewn remnants of the primal Sabbath’s hymn.  
And I remember here  
A tale of evil twined  
With good, serpent and vine,  
And innocence as evil’s stratagem.

I let that go a while,  
For it is hopeless to correct  
By generations’ toil,  
And I let go my hopes and plans  
That no toil can perfect.  
There is no vision here but what is seen:  
White bloom nothing explains

But a mute blessedness  
Exceeding all distress,  
The fresh light stained a hundred shades of green.

Uproar of wheel and fire  
That has contained us like a cell  
Opens and lets us hear  
A stillness longer than all time  
Where leaf and song fulfill  
The passing light, pass with the light, return,  
Renewed, as in a rhyme.  
This is no human vision  
Subject to our revision;  
God's eye holds every leaf as light is worn.

Ruin is in place here:  
The dead leaves rotting on the ground,  
The live leaves in the air  
Are gathered in a single dance  
That turns them round and round.  
The fox cub trots his almost pathless path  
As silent as his absence.  
These passings resurrect  
A joy without defect,  
The life that steps and sings in ways of death.

*This Day: Sabbath Poems, 1979: IV – Wendell Berry*

# “Learn by little the desire for all things”

Learn by little the desire for all things  
which perhaps is not desire at all  
but undying love which perhaps  
is not love at all but gratitude  
for the being of all things which  
perhaps is not gratitude at all  
but the maker's joy in what is made,  
the joy in which we come to rest.

*This Day: Sabbath Poems, 2007: XII – Wendell Berry*

# “Eternity is not infinity”

Eternity is not infinity.  
It is not a long time.  
It does not begin at the end of time.  
It does not run parallel to time.  
In its entirety it always was.  
In its entirety it will always be.  
It is entirely present always.

*This Day: Sabbath Poems, 2005: XIII – Wendell Berry*

# “Here where the world is being made”

Here where the world is being made,  
No human hand required,  
A man may come, somewhat afraid  
Always, and somewhat tired,

For he comes ignorant and alone  
From work and worry of  
A human place, in soul and bone  
The ache of human love.

He may come and be still, not go  
Toward any chosen aim  
Or stay for what he thinks is so.  
Setting aside his claim

On all things fallen in his plight,  
His mind may move with leaves,  
Wind-shaken, in and out of light,  
And live as the light lives,

And live as the Creation sings  
In covert, two clear notes,  
And waits; then two clear answerings  
Come from more distant throats--

May live a while with light, shaking  
In high leaves, or delayed  
In halts of song, submit to making,  
The shape of what is made.

*This Day: Sabbath Poems, 1981: I – Wendell Berry*

# “The difference is a polished”

The difference is a polished  
blade, edgewise to the eye.  
On one side gleams the sun  
of time, and on the other  
the never-fading light,  
and so the tree that stands  
full-leaved in broad day  
and darkness following  
stands also in the eye  
of Love and is never darkened.

The blade that divides these lights  
mirrors both--is one.  
Time and eternity  
stand in the same day  
which is now in time, and forever  
now. How do we know?  
We know, We know we know,  
They only truly live  
who are the comforted.

*This Day: Sabbath Poems, 1999: VIII – Wendell Berry*

# “Coming to the woods’ edge”

Coming to the woods’ edge  
on my Sunday morning walk,  
I stand resting a moment beside  
a ragged half-dead wild plum

in bloom, its perfume  
a moment enclosing me,  
and standing side by side  
with the old broken blooming tree,  
I almost understand,  
I almost recognize as a friend  
the great impertinence of beauty  
that comes even to the dying,  
even to the fallen, without reason  
sweetening the air.

I walk on,  
distracted by the letter accusing me  
of distraction, which distracts me  
only from the hundred things  
that would otherwise distract me  
from this whiteness, lightness,  
sweetness in the air. The mind  
is broken by the thousand  
calling voices it is always too late  
to answer, and that is why it yearns  
for some hard task, lifelong, longer  
than life, to concentrate it  
and to make it whole.

But where is the all-welcoming,  
all-consecrating Sabbath  
that would do the same? Where  
that quietness of the heart  
and the eye's clarity  
that would be a friend's reply  
to the white-blossoming plum tree?

*This Day: Sabbath Poems, 1987: I – Wendell Berry*

# "Six days of work are spent"

Six days of work are spent  
To make a Sunday quiet  
That Sabbath may return.  
It comes in unconcern;  
We cannot earn or buy it.  
Suppose rest is not sent  
Or comes and goes unknown,  
The light, unseen, unshown.  
Suppose the day begins  
In wrath at circumstance,  
Or anger at one's friends  
In vain self-innocence  
False to the very light,  
Breaking the sun in half,  
Or anger at oneself  
Whose controverting will  
Would have the sun stand still.  
The world is lost in loss  
Of patience; the old curse  
Returns, and is made worse  
As newly justified.  
In hopeless fret and fuss,  
In rage at worldly plight  
Creation is defied,  
All order is unpropped,  
All light and singing stopped.

*This Day: Sabbath Poems, 1980: V – Wendell Berry*

# “The frog with lichened back and golden thigh”

The frog with lichened back and golden thigh  
Sits still, almost invisible  
On leafed and lichened stem,  
Invisibility  
Its sign of being at home  
There in its given place, and well.

The warbler with its quivering striped throat  
Would live almost beyond my sight,  
Almost beyond belief,  
But for its double note —  
Among high leaves a leaf,  
At ease, at home in air and light.

And I, through woods and fields, through fallen days,  
Am passing to where I belong:  
At home, at ease, and well,  
In Sabbaths of this place  
Almost invisible,  
Toward which I go from song to song.

*This Day: Sabbath Poems, 1980: IV – Wendell Berry*

# “Life forgives its depredations”

Life forgives its depredations;  
new-shaped by loss, goes on.  
Luther Penn, our neighbor  
still in our minds, will not  
come down to the creek mouth to fish  
in April anymore. The year  
ripens. Leaves fall. In openings  
where old trees were cut down,  
showing the ground to the sky,  
snakeroot blooms white,  
giving shine unto the world.  
Ant and beetle scuttle through  
heroic passages, go to dust;  
their armor tumbles in the mold.  
Broad wings enter the grove, gold  
and are still, open and go.

*This Day: Sabbath Poems, 1985: VI – Wendell Berry*

# “And now the lowland grove is down, the trees”

And now the lowland grove is down, the trees  
Fallen that had unearthly power to please  
The earthly eye, and gave unearthly solace  
To minds grown quiet in that quiet place.  
To see them standing was to know a prayer  
Prayed to the Holly Spirit in the air  
By that same Spirit dwelling in the ground.

The wind in their high branches gave the sound  
Of air replying to that prayer. The rayed  
Imperial light sang in the leaves it made.

To live as mourner of a human friend  
Is but to understand the common end  
Told by the steady counting in the wrist.  
For though the absent friend is mourned and missed  
As every pulse, it is a human loss  
In human time made well; our grief will bless  
At last the dear lost flesh and breath; it will  
Grow quiet as the body in the hill.

To live to mourn an ancient woodland, known  
Always, loved with an old love handed down,  
That is a grief that will outlast the griever,  
Grief as landmark, grief as a wearing river  
That in its passing stays, bidding in rhyme  
Of year with year, time with returning time,  
As though beyond the grave the soul will wait  
In long unrest the shaping of the light  
In branch and bole through centuries that prepare  
This ground to pray again its finest prayer.

*This Day: Sabbath Poems, 1987: III – Wendell Berry*

“It’s spring. The birds sing,”

It's spring. The birds sing.  
And how explain their singing?  
The objective biologist wishes  
to know. He knows! Sex.

The genes' imperative to survive  
in a hostile world. His bird  
is the Poppy Cock. The birds  
of the actual woodland sing  
to the season and their dearest loves  
their beautiful offering,  
as long ago Chaucer  
knew, who knew also  
that all love songs come  
from the one Muse: "Blessed  
be Seynt Valentyn,  
For on this day I chees yow  
to be myn, Withouten  
Repentyng, myn herte sweete!"  
So sang the "smale fowles"  
in the time-delighted trees  
in Chaucer's hearing and in ours  
eternal mystery.

*This Day: Sabbath Poems, 2012: IV – Wendell Berry*

## "Off in the woods in the quiet"

Off in the woods in the quiet  
morning a redbird is singing  
and his song goes out around him  
greater than its purpose,  
a welcoming room of song  
in which the trees stand,  
through which the creek flows.

*This Day: Sabbath Poems, 2011: VIII – Wendell Berry*

# “Though his tenure on the earth”

Though his tenure on the earth  
is that of a blade of grass,  
though his acquaintance among the dead  
increases year by year  
and, like many grown old  
before, he lives from the loss  
of one beloved companion  
to the loss of yet another,  
the old man prays to find  
at the end of his own leash,  
his love for the world at hand,  
his heart at rest in gratitude.

Still, his old nightmares  
return. He dreams of permanent  
destruction, his country broken,  
its woodlands felled, its streams  
poisoned. The future deviling  
in his mind, his life shattered  
and strewn in the public way,  
his dreams recall the night  
of Gethsemane, the fear  
that the end of the way taken  
is not to die merely,  
but to die forsaken, the heart  
finally broken.

From this  
despair he asks to be  
remade, set free, let go  
if only into the sanity of grief,  
if only to suffer the suffering  
of old companions he has loved

and loves. Sometimes his love  
returns, finds him in his dream,  
and leads him home.

*This Day: Sabbath Poems, 2012: III – Wendell Berry*

## “Hate has no world”

Hate has no world.  
The people of hate must try  
to possess the world of love,  
for it is the only world;  
it is Heaven and Earth.  
But as lonely, eager hate  
possesses it, it disappears;  
it never did exist,  
and hate must seek another  
world that love has made.

*This Day: Sabbath Poems, 1993: IV – Wendell Berry*

## “In early morning we awaken from”

In early morning we awaken from  
The sound of engines running in the night,  
And then we start the engines of the day.  
We speed away into the fading light.

Nowhere is any sound but of our going  
On roads strung everywhere with humming wire.  
Nowhere is there an end except in smoke.  
This is the world that we have set on fire.

This is the promised burning, darkening  
Our light of hope and putting out the sun,  
Blighting the leaf, the stream--and blessed are  
The dead who died before this time began.

Blessed the dead who have escaped in time  
The twisted metal and the fractured stone,  
The technobodies of the hopeless cure.  
Now, to the living, only grief has shown

The little yellow of the violet  
Risen again out of the dead year's leaves,  
And grief alone is measure of the love  
That only lives by rising out of graves.

*This Day: Sabbath Poems, 1989: I – Wendell Berry*