

Grace at work

by [Norman Wirzba](#) in the [November 18, 1998](#) issue

By Wendell Berry, A Timbered Choir: The Sabbath Poems 1979-1987. (Counterpoint, 216 pp.)

Some of the busiest people I know are made busy by the many good and important activities performed at or for the church. Because our work weeks are so harried and Saturdays hardly give us time to catch up, we try to cram all the "church stuff" into Sunday, filling the day with committee meetings and special events. It is not surprising, then, that Sundays come to be as frenetic as the rest of our lives.

Over the past two decades, Kentucky poet, novelist and essayist Wendell Berry has been celebrating the Sabbath--and the other days of the week too--in a decidedly different fashion. Pencil and paper in hand, he has gone walking on his farm, reflecting on how to achieve a more faithful life, a life that resists busyness and the trappings of self-aggrandizement. Berry's "Sabbath poems" invite us to a new appreciation of life, work and play that just might put us on the path to a healthier, saner existence. They reinvigorate our sense of the importance of praise and worship in daily life, and show us how the rigors of life, when properly undergone, can lead to delight.

For Berry the Sabbath entails much more than "taking a break" from daily routines. It permeates and defines daily existence because it is a way of being. The Sabbath is a disposition and a resolute desire to live a life that acknowledges our Creator and our place as creatures in a world wonderfully made. It requires a transformation in spirit that will keep the heart and mind attentive to God's goodness and grace. We learn to participate in the pleasure and delight that marked God's first encounter with the newly created world.

We are helped in our understanding of these poems if we return to the Genesis account of the first Sabbath. In reading this account we are tempted to see the day of rest as marking a release from the labors of the previous six days: like us, God is tired from work and so needs time to relax and unwind. This reading, however, fails to see that God has all along been celebrating goodness in all that is made. There

was, as Berry puts it, a "blessed conviviality / That sang Creation's seventh sunrise," a singing and a radiance made possible by the Maker's radiant sight. God's regard, God's very looking at things, infused them with "perfect joy and life and light." The hallowed character of the seventh day is thus the summation of a hallowing that has been going on all along.

Berry knows that in many ways our world is anything but hallowed. It is beset with pain, fear and hubris, with the anxiety of placelessness. At the dawn of creation, things "sought no gain / Or growth beyond their proper measures / Nor longed for change or novelty." They were complete, content in the pleasure of God's good pleasure. But the desire for novelty and the rejection of our placed-ness as creatures brought pain, and this pain is the root of our striving. Having refused our status as creatures, we are condemned to wander in a dark world far removed from the joy of God's light. In our confused searches for self-made satisfaction we fail to see that we cannot be our own light, since God alone is the light through which all things are and came to be. Caught up in lives of quiet desperation, we forget that "where we arrive by work, we stay by grace."

As readers of Berry's other works (*The Hidden Wound*, *Home Economics*, *Another Turn of the Crank*, for example) well know, this problem must be addressed on a social and economic level. The very structures of our economies resist praise and delight because they are driven by the systematic mistreatment and abuse of others and the world: "This is a nation where / No lovely thing can last. / We trample, gouge, and blast; / The people leave the land; / The land flows to the Sea."

A genuine observance of the Sabbath would amount to a revolutionary act. (Here Berry follows the ancient Israelites, who saw a direct link between Sabbath observance and the year of the Jubilee. Jubilee stood for an economic vision that may never have been historically realized yet had the power to pronounce judgment on exploitative or demeaning economies.) Sabbath life must refuse the life of existing economies, not by simply dropping out of this life but by modeling an alternative economy, one that has the care and delight of all creation as its central inspiration: "Be thankful and repay / Growth with good work and care. / Work done in gratitude, / Kindly, and well, is prayer."

Berry's poems invite us back to the pleasure of God's grace. The quiet ease of his lines introduce us to the serenity of God's order. Reading these poems, one senses the unhurried stillness of God's resolve to love the world into creation. We and all of

creation are a gift given--"We live by mercy if we live." Attention and care, two qualities central to a Sabbath economy, mark these poems. Berry both introduces and invites us to Sabbath reality:

O bent by fear and sorrow, now bend down,
Leave word an argument, be dark and still,
And come into the joy of healing shade.
Rest from your work. Be still and dark until
You grow as unopposing, unafraid
As the young trees, without thought or belief;
Until the shadow Sabbath light has made
Shudders, breaks open, shines in every leaf.

Berry presents forests, especially old-growth forests, as a metaphor for Sabbath reality. Here we find the "primal Sabbath hymn"--a song of praise of the cycles of death and rebirth, growth and decay. If we have the ears to hear, the forest sings songs of patience and unconcern. Trees form a "timbered choir" in praise of the advent of life. "We are all praising, praying to / The light we are, but cannot know." Nothing need be accomplished or achieved. The life of the forest is carried along or upheld by a power beyond itself; its concern is to submit or be faithful to that power. Grass, flowers and trees rise simply to greet the light. Trees are "apostles of the living light." Growth and gratitude become indistinguishable.

One of the goals of these poems is to make us see that our lives are kept and maintained by God's will, not by our own. A sign of this transformation will be a disposition tuned to thankfulness rather than worry. But the transformation requires a mind at rest: "The mind that comes to rest is tended / In ways that it cannot intend: / Is borne, preserved, and comprehended / By what it cannot comprehend."

Berry's vision will sound foreign to many of us. Its strangeness, however, is less a reflection of Berry's unusual agrarian lifestyle than it is an indictment of how far removed we have become from the grace of creation.