

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



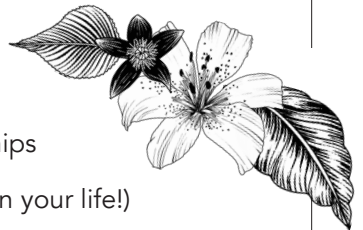
same time, it provides a foretaste of the Promised Land, the “milk and honey” toward which salvation history moves.

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" (*This Day*, p.154)

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

+ Matthew 6:3



## MEDITATE

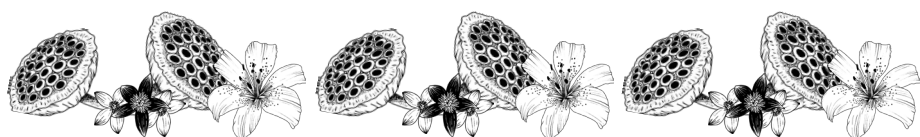
Jesus challenges us to give, pray, fast, and value in ways that aren't paraded out in public for all to see, but rather take place "in secret" – hidden even from ourselves ("do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing"). Jesus' repeated emphasis here points to something essential about 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" (*This Day*, p. 328); and Jesus' overall portrait of quiet, unassuming generosity with Berry's II, 1999, "I dream of a quiet man" (*This Day*, p. 196).

## 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" (*This Day*, p. 7).



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" (*This Day*, p. 249); 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" (*This Day*, p. 11).

## 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" (*This Day*, p.201)

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

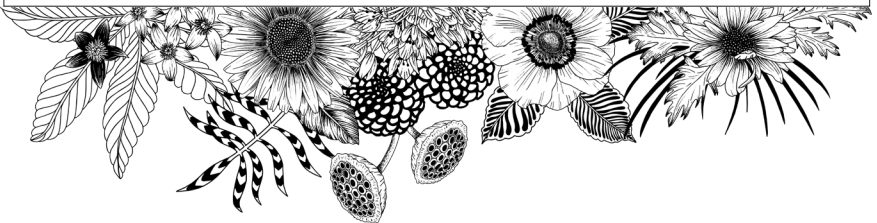
For more on the links between love, joy, and rest, see Berry's XII, 2007, "Learn by little the desire for all things" (*This Day*, p. 312); and for a brief reflection on "eternity" that illuminates the "eternal life" at the heart of John 3:15-17, see Berry's XIII, 2005, "Eternity is not infinity" (*This Day*, p. 274).



# 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?" (*This Day*, p. 67)

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" (*This Day*, p. 33); and for insight on how "eternal life" is related to everyday life, see Berry's VIII, 1999, "The difference is a polished" (*This Day*, p. 202).

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” (*This Day*, VI, 1987, p. 80)

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” (*This Day*, pp. 73, 29, 28).

## 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!" (*This Day*,  
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" (*This Day*, pp. 68, 77).

## 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.



## PALM SUNDAY

READ

*Scripture*

Matthew 21:1-11

*Sabbath Poem*

I, 1986, “Slowly, slowly, they return” (*This Day*, p. 71)



**“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” (*This Day*, pp. 379, 367).

# 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" (*This Day*, p. 383)



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" (*This Day*, p. 377).

## 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"  
(*This Day*, p. 82)

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” (*This Day*, pp. 144, 87).

## 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" (*This Day*, p. 329)  
Pair this poem with an online image of Piero della Francesca's famous fresco, *The Resurrection*

III, 2009, "After windstorm and ice storm" (*This Day*, p. 331)  
A beautiful meditation on how "the world is saved by tenderness"

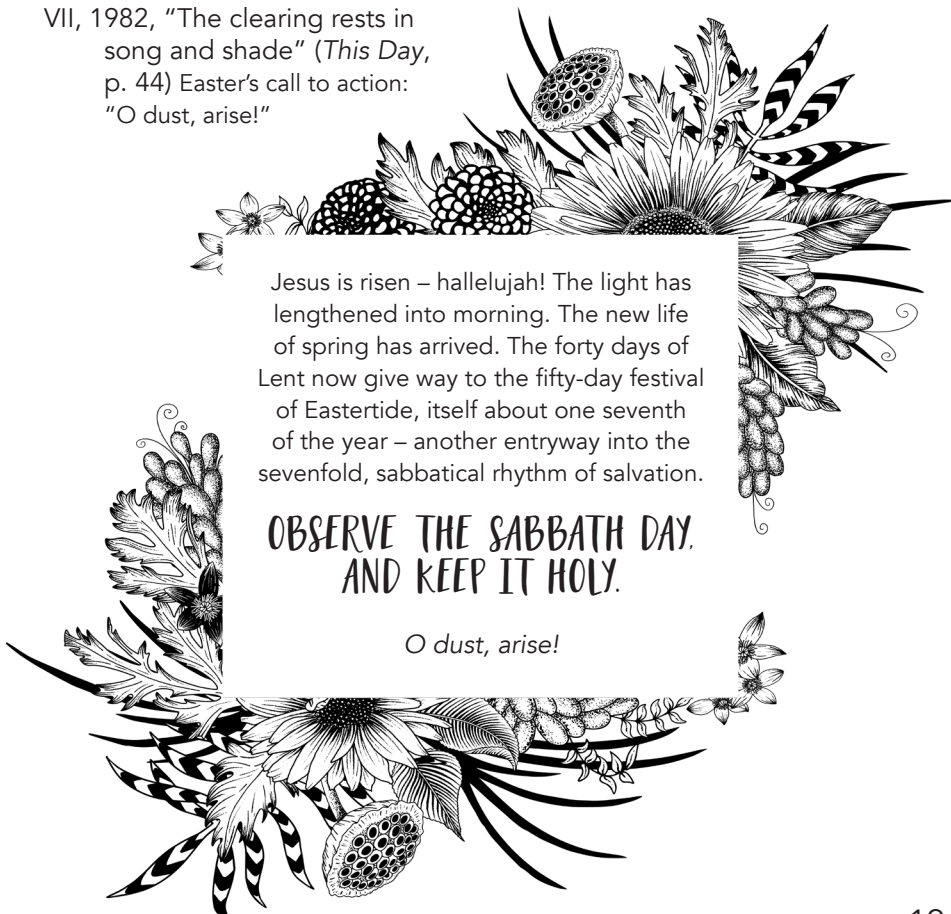
III, 1992, "Again we come" (*This Day*, p. 131)  
A vivid, humble picture of resurrection in creation

IV, 2003, "The little stream sings" (*This Day*, p. 241)  
A poem Berry wrote on Easter morning

V, 2003, "The politics of illusion, of death's money" (*This Day*, p. 242)  
In eight lines, the whole journey: Good Friday to Easter Sunday

V, 1994, "Raking hay on a rough slope" (*This Day*, p. 152)  
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" (*This Day*, p. 44) 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!*

# SPECIAL EVENTS THIS SEASON

