

Sabbath Blessings

BY WILLOW HAMBRICK

In their sabbath poems and essays, Wendell Berry and Molly Wolf reveal God touching humanity in the midst of the every day. When we read their words, ordinary trees become “timbered choirs,” “the sun comes out and lights the leaves in glory,” and we are pulled “toward a great something that lies at the heart of things.”

In our world of calendars and compromise, sabbath keeping is difficult for me as a mother of five children. Recently I was assigned a fitness training session at 11:00 on Sunday morning. When I told the instructor I attend a worship service at that time, he said, “Well, I guess that’s your problem, isn’t it?” Then there is the coach who told my daughter’s team, “I don’t want to hear from any of you about how church commitments will interfere with practice. We have limited playing fields, and no times are sacred.”

Finding even a smidgen of time for worship is difficult if our programs are running late, like at the formal banquet I attended where the host stepped up to the microphone and announced, “Since we are behind schedule, we will dispense with the prayer.”

About people who calmly dispense with prayers and disregard worship with no apparent fear or trembling, we wonder with Thoreau, “Does any divinity stir within them?” When we see the erosion of our faith traditions happening on our watch, Christians feel like remnant people “being pressed on all sides” in a profane world. We search for ways to practice our faith and to proclaim God’s truth.

When the world seems too much with me, I am encouraged by authors who stir Christian reflection through words that incarnate the sacred rhythms of creation, fall, and redemption of humankind in the midst of the

every day. Both Wendell Berry and Molly Wolf inspire me, not as overt Christian writers, but as artists whose books reveal God touching humanity. The sabbath poems of Wendell Berry and the sabbath musings of Molly Wolf help me observe the essence of sabbath: rest, remembrance, redemption, and a recommitment to Christian precepts. When I read their words, ordinary trees become "timbered choirs," "the sun comes out and lights the leaves in glory," and I am pulled "toward a great something that lies at the heart of things."

Wendell Berry's *A Timbered Choir* (Counterpoint Publishing Company, 1998; 216 pp., \$12.50 paperback) is a collection of "Sabbath Poems," so called because he wrote many of them during Sunday morning walks on his farm in Henry County, Kentucky: "Another Sunday morning comes and I resume the standing Sabbath of the woods, where the finest blooms of time return...." (p. 6). A contemplative reading of his poems removes us from the noise of our day. As we assimilate his words, our minds become a sanctuary where we can rest in the Lord of all creation.

Berry understands the importance of maintaining a strong work ethic during six days of the week, but also the Old Testament imperative for sabbath rest on the seventh day: "Six days of work are spent / To make a Sunday quiet / That Sabbath may return" (p. 29). As we pause from our normal routines, we remember the miracle of our release, as God's chosen people, from the bondage of sin and toil and this energizes us. We gratefully acknowledge that when God's grace infuses our sweat, there is joy in the harvest:

Harvest will fill the barn; for that
The hand must ache, the face must sweat.
And yet no leaf or grain is filled
By work of ours; the field is tilled
And left to grace. That we may reap,
Great work is done while we're asleep.
When we work well, a Sabbath mood
Rests on our day, and finds it good. (p. 18)

We require sabbath rest to reconnect with our Creator against whom we have sinned with our indulgent and destructive ways ("This was a garden once, a good and perfect gift;" p. 16), and to whom we turn for forgiveness and redemption ("Christ dead and risen in my own flesh shall judge, condemn, and then forgive," p. 97). At times, solemn words of condemnation and healing flow from Berry's prophetic pen with "If-Then" conditions reminiscent of God's making covenant with Israel:

There are two healings: nature's,
and ours and nature's. Nature's
will come in spite of us, after us,

over the graves of its wasters, as it comes
to the forsaken fields. The healing
that is ours and nature's will come
if we are willing, if we are patient,
if we know the way, if we will do the work.... (p. 47)

Throughout *A Timbered Choir* the poet manifests God in nature and in the ordinary, and recognizes His hand in the divine cycles of death and resurrection, and loss and restoration: "The seed is in the ground. / Now may we rest in hope / While darkness does its work" (p. 131). He never understates the fact that we are broken people who have done "violence to the ground" (p. 46) and pray to "be delivered from the blaze that we have earned" (p. 110), but he also celebrates that as God's people, we live with the sabbath possibility of "hope outreaching wrong" (p. 59).

Crafted with care by Berry, even as one might organize a worship service mindful of its sacred rituals and traditions, each poem symbolizes God's ordered creation. The cadence of his words becomes an audible vehicle for sounds of sacred harmony; they soothe our minds and calm our spirits with the same lilting rhythm as a Shaker chant: "We join our work to Heaven's gift, / Our hope to what is left" (p. 49).

The poems flow like hymns written to blend the natural world of larkspur and bloodroot with a personified metaphysical world where "every leaf's a tongue" (p. 89) sending forth prayers to "the Holy Spirit in the air" (p. 91). Under the canopy of trees and stars, Berry invites us to worship God as Creator and Redeemer ("That Ghost who stirs in seed and tomb," p. 44), as Judge ("And death the narrow gate each one must pass Alone," p. 21), and as mysterious and gracious Lord who rises up like a Gardener shaking off the dark:

Be still. A man who seems to be
A Gardener rises out of the ground,
Stands like a tree, shakes off the dark,
The bluebells opening at his feet,
The light a figured cloth of song. (p. 43)

Wendell Berry's sabbath writing takes us into the woods where we can walk ancient paths and kneel beside still waters. If, upon occasion, attending a worship service is not an option, it is a sabbath experience to meditate upon his poems. They give God voice and song in the midst of our chaotic schedules and destructive lifestyles; and if we will respond to the pull and call of sabbath keeping, then we can receive the blessing of "a hand that reaches up out of the ground, holding a lamp" (p. 155).

In *Angels and Dragons* (Doubleday, 2001; 195 pp., \$19.95 hardback) Molly Wolf offers "a collection of vignettes drawn from life interspersed with meditations of where theology intersects with real life" (p. vii). The

most autobiographical of her books, *Angels and Dragons* takes readers through what she labels the “Big Emotional Stuff” of her life—an abusive marriage, divorce, falling away from organized church, and other “interesting times” she endured and overcame. “As I wrestled with each chunk of pain or PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder],” says Wolf, “I turned on it the light of my faith: where is God in all this? What’s the meaning here? How can I make sense of this in light of my Christian beliefs?” (p. viii). Each week she writes a sabbath meditation that she distributes by email and publishes on the Internet; many of these are collected in *Hiding in Plain Sight* (The Liturgical Press, 1998; 134 pp., \$12.95 paperback) and *A Place Like Any Other* (Doubleday, 2000; 229 pp., \$12.95 paperback).

Wolf never loses sight of the fact that in the fallen creation, we are “miserable offenders” in need of grace. Yet as she gazes out the window of her “untidy” Victorian home at “the annual milkweed miracle” displayed on the scruffy Manitoba plains, she is assured that the glory of creation “hints at what might lie beyond the River” (*A Place Like Any Other*, p. 9).

Like Wendell Berry, Wolf invites a sabbath mood by insisting that we take the time to rest and reflect: “If we give God the slightest opening, some corner of the Spirit gets lodged in us like a splinter in the skin...[and] the Spirit calls to our own inner selves saying, ‘Please let me love you.’” As we approach the God of the sabbath, the author of our lives, and place on the altar our pain, uncertainty, and potential for both good and evil, we will learn “to live with the chaos, trust in God’s purpose for us, and emerge with a new fullness of soul” (*Hiding in Plain Sight*, p. 91).

Her writing is bold, passionate, and significant even when she is writing about the mundane, the weak, and the insignificant.

“Hanging out the laundry, like cooking or doing dishes,” she explains, “permits me to slip into that state where I am actively contemplative, something that’s invaluable for a writer and a Christian” (*Angels and Dragons*, pp. 6-7). She asks important questions we all have on our minds, and then records how her “Big Deep Hurt” is transformed in an unexpected breakthrough of God’s “still small voice” as she stands in line to buy a lug wrench at the hardware store.

Wendell Berry manifests God in nature and in the ordinary. He never understates the fact that we are broken people who have done “violence to the ground” and pray to “be delivered from the blaze that we have earned,” but he also celebrates that as God’s people, we live with the sabbath possibility of “hope outreaching wrong.”

These honest meditations (which Wolf calls “bathroom theology” with characteristic humor and humility) are pathways to a sabbath experience, for she reveals the reality of her interior life, no matter how messy, and becomes transparent and vulnerable before God and her readers.

The “hardscrabble” environment of Canada with its “matter-of-fact, hard-fisted realness” shapes Wolf’s theology. Like God talking to Job, she bluntly states, “This is Canada. This is January. You expected maybe feathers?” (*A Place Like Any*

As she kept the sabbath in the privacy of her own heart, Molly Wolf began to remember the sacred rituals that connected her to nature, to humankind, and to her Savior. This sure knowledge that “God is in this world . . . drawing us to himself,” nudged her back into the fellowship of the church like a “prodigal come home.”

Other, p. 99). She admonishes readers to “learn to accept reality with toughness, patience, humor, and optimism,” with full understanding of Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s claim that grace is neither cheap nor comfortable. “Winter is winter. What matters is what we make of it.” We must learn to accept God for who He is even in the midst of “Real Big Evil,” trusting that “God aches when we ache . . . experi-

ences suffering alongside us . . . and wills our healing” (*A Place Like Any Other*, p. 100).

In “an intensely living quietness” she draws near to God for rest and redemption, and learns to recognize His peace in the often “leafless” and tedious aspects of the every day:

Maybe I should stop struggling to create peace inside my own confused and buzzing self, with its huge, irresolvable contradictions of faith and faithlessness, hope and despair, flashes of joy and pain. Maybe instead I should simply let God’s companionable quietness suck all the turmoil out. . . . Maybe I’m supposed to lie back in God’s arms, chattering to God like a child instead of pretending to be the grown-up I know in my heart I’m not. (*Hiding in Plain Sight* p. 121)

When she turned her back on the institutional church years ago, Wolf maintained a remnant of her faith “that had been an ember in the ashes all along” (*Hiding in Plain Sight* p. 93). As she kept the sabbath in the privacy of her own mind and heart, she began to remember the sacred rituals that connected her to nature, to humankind, and to her Savior. These memories of who she was created to be and the sure knowledge that “God is in *this*

world...drawing us to himself" nudged her back into the fellowship of the church like a "prodigal come home" (*Hiding in Plain Sight* p. 95).

Sabbath keeping is not dependent on a place, or even a time, Wolf understands; it depends on the depth and integrity of our awareness of God in the here and now, and the feeling that we are at home and restored in his presence. Her best sabbath writing compares our spiritual journeys to aspects of nature:

We're like geese painstakingly beating our way home, one stage at a time.... It's in the course of beating our way slowly home that we make our souls—[and] create who it is that we will give back to our Creator when we come before God's judgment.... Home lies at the end. Once there, we can rest. And we will never have to journey back again. (*A Place Like Any Other*, pp. 138-139)

Molly Wolf knows her redeemer lives: in the Canadian woods, under her sink, in the green bug crawling across her computer screen, and in the interruptions of children. Avoiding despair and cynicism, she provides readers front porch rocking chairs in which they can sit down alongside her in the winter of their lives and anticipate "the promise of greenness" (*A Place Like Any Other*, p. 128). Her weekly "Sabbath Blessings" prompt self-examination, a reckoning with both the dragons and angels in our midst, and the awareness of a loving God "hiding in plain sight" and in "a place like any other."

NOTE

Molly Wolf begins a new series of Sabbath Blessings each year after Canadian Thanksgiving. If you would like to receive these meditations free by email, contact Molly Wolf directly at lupa2@cyberus.ca or visit the Web site sabbath-blessings.org.



WILLOW HAMBRICK

is a freelance writer who lives in Georgetown, Kentucky.