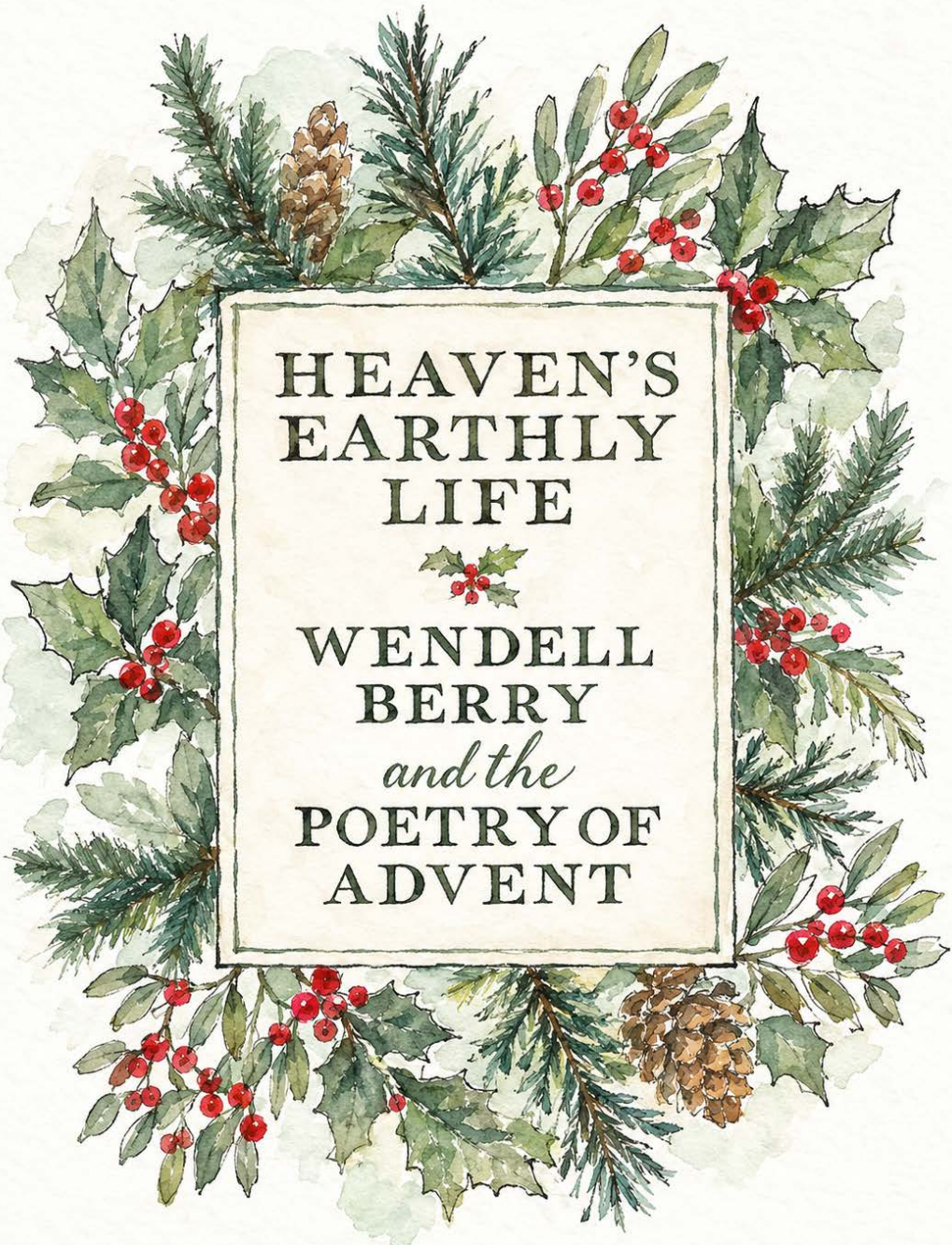
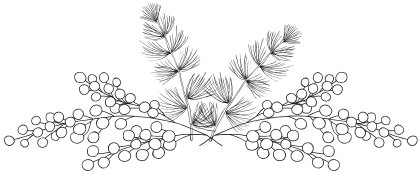

HEAVEN'S
EARTHLY
LIFE
WENDELL
BERRY
and the
POETRY OF
ADVENT



"IT GETS DARKER
AND DARKER,
AND THEN
JESUS IS BORN."

+ WENDELL BERRY



INTRODUCTION

The Christian year – and in that sense, the Christian faith – begins not with the brilliant flowers of Easter, the dazzling flames of Pentecost, or the soft glow of Christmas morning. It begins with the longest nights of the year, the growing shadows of despair, conflict, sorrow, and hate – for it's there that the God of hope, peace, joy, and love will arrive.

The word "Advent" means *arrival*. It's the four-week season of mindfully watching, waiting, and preparing for Jesus to arrive – and at the same time to arrive ourselves at the manger, so to speak, not thousands of years ago on the other side of the world, but wherever we are, right here, right now. That's the journey of Advent. God arriving – and each one of us arriving, too. "It gets darker and darker," the poet Wendell Berry once remarked to the writer Anne Lamott, "and then Jesus is born."

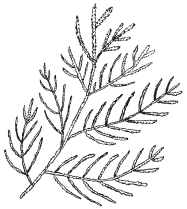
Poetry can help us adjust our eyes to the darkness – and thereby notice the light. In this Advent devotional, we let scripture and Berry's poetry be our guides, together pointing us toward weekly practices that can help us prepare for the radiant joy to come.

So grab your favorite Bible and *Berry's New Collected Poems*, *Collected Poems*, and *This Day* (the poems in this devotional can also be found online). Week by week, we'll make our way through the dark, arriving at last on Christmas day, that beautiful glimpse of heaven's earthly life.



WEEK ONE
HOPE

LIGHT
One Candle



READ
Matthew 24:36-44

"To Know the Dark," by Wendell Berry
(*New Collected Poems*, p. 121; also online)

> "Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your God is coming. But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Child of Humanity is coming at an unexpected hour." + Matthew 24:42-44

REFLECT
In the Northern Hemisphere, the season of Advent includes the longest nights of the year – and we sometimes imagine the lights of Christmas as holding those shadows at bay. But as Berry suggests, to "keep awake" in the midst of darkness requires us "to know the dark," to "go dark," allowing our senses to make out the dark feet and dark wings all around us. In this sense, a flashlight can limit our awareness. Likewise, stargazing under a clear sky, after about 15 minutes our eyes adjust, and more stars appear.

Advent is indeed about light – but it begins with knowing the dark.. Going there. Dwelling there. For that's where Jesus calls us to "keep awake," since that's where God is coming into the world. We start, then, by attending to the depths of the night. *Go dark. Keep awake. Come, Jesus, come!*

PRAY

God of light and darkness, help us to know the light, and also to know the dark. Keep us awake for your arrival, even at an unexpected hour. Open our eyes to the deepest shadows of despair within us and around us, and kindle a flame of hope. Come, Jesus, come! Amen.

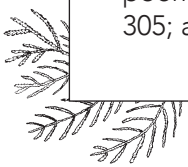
SING

"O Come, O Come, Emmanuel"
"In the Bleak Midwinter"
"Come Ye Disconsolate"



MORE LIGHT

Pair Berry's encouragement to "Go without sight" with his similar idea of going without sound, so to speak, in two poems perfect for the quiet of Advent: "How to Be a Poet" (*New Collected Poems*, p. 354; also online) and "The Silence" (in the earlier volume, *Collected Poems*, p. 156; also online). In darkness and in silence, this is a season of patiently, actively awaiting the One coming into the world. And for a longer meditation on hope, and a different aspect of darkness, see Berry's Sabbath poem, "2007, VI: It is hard to have hope" (*This Day*, p. 305; also online).



DAILY PRACTICES

- Each day this week, either before dawn or after sunset (or both), light a candle of hope – but pause before lighting it, taking an intentional minute to "know the dark." What wonders, what mysteries do you sense there? What despair, what glimmers of hope?



SPRIG OF HOPE

Start an Advent journal. Each day, jot down a single line – from Berry, from scripture, from your own imagination – and tape a small evergreen sprig under the line as a sign of hope and beauty. Keep it simple. Keep it daily. Keep awake.

- Conversation starters: What are the main sources of hope in your everyday life? What examples come to mind? Berry writes that "the dark, too, blooms and sings" – where in the world's shadows do you see and hear hopeful signs of life?

- Over much of his life, Berry has taken weekly "Sabbath walks" in the woods around his house and farm, often followed by writing poems (many of which have been published as "Sabbath Poems"). Take a Sabbath walk this week. And during the full moon this month (technically a three-day span), try a short night walk. Go dark!
- Support a particular person or organization devoted to dwelling in the shadows of despair and providing glimmers of hope. Think mental health professionals, services that help people detach from extremist groups, hospice care, refugee assistance, policy advocacy, and more. Send them a handwritten note of thanks – and a donation. Every little bit helps!
- Commit "To Know the Dark" to memory. Whisper it as a prayer. Carry it with you wherever you go.



QUIET MIRACLES

Every winter, evergreens pull off a quiet miracle: while broad-leafed trees go bare, evergreens stay green through the darkest, coldest season. Their needles lock in water, their resin resists frost, and their shape lets snow slide away. They're living proof that the "winters of our discontent" will not have the final word. Spring will come again.

WEEK TWO
PEACE

LIGHT
Two Candles



READ
Matthew 3:1-12

"The Peace of Wild Things," by Wendell Berry
(*New Collected Poems*, p. 79; also online)

> In those days John the Baptizer appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight!'" … "I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is coming after me is more powerful than I, and I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." + Matthew 3:1-3;11-12

REFLECT
The word Matthew uses for "repentance" is the Greek word *metanoia*, literally "change of mind"; today we would say, "change of heart" or "change of life." This is the opening sermon in the New Testament – and later, Jesus' opening sermon, too (see Matthew 4:17). It's a call to a profound, pervasive change, but it isn't "Change, for you have done wrong," or "Change, for you are unworthy." Rather, it's "Change, for heaven has come near." Heaven is at hand, so close we can reach out and touch it. And so the question is: What kind of change is called for?

Berry gives us a clue. At bottom, it's a change from a posture of turmoil and conflict to a posture of peace – a peace learned, please

note, from "wild things" and "wilderness" (John the Baptizer, that wild man in the wilderness, would approve!). Indeed, Berry takes that opening sermon seriously: if "the kingdom of heaven" really is at hand, then it is also underfoot, and all around us, in wild neighbors no less than in human ones. Earth is not identical with heaven, but nor is it dualistically opposed to it, or even separable from it. This is a major theme in Berry's poetry – and also in Jesus' teaching ("heaven has come near!"). And as we'll discover in the weeks ahead, it's also a central theme of Advent and Christmas.

With heaven so near, what repentance, what change is called for? In a word, peace: peace with our neighbors, human and otherwise; peace with the land community itself; and peace in our hearts, as we rest in the grace of the world, and are free.

PRAY

God of grace, make us peacemakers. In strife, let us make peace with each other. In ruin, let us make peace with creation. In despair, let us make peace in our minds. Burn away the husks around our hearts, Holy Spirit, the chaff that keeps us from noticing heaven's earthly life and changing our lives. Come, Prince of Peace, come! Amen.

SING

"Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus"
"Down By the Riverside"
"Peace Like a River"

MORE LIGHT

For Berry, "peace" often takes the form of healing and restoration, both for human beings (as in "The Peace of Wild Things") and for the land community itself. With this in mind, read "The Slip" (*Collected Poems*, p. 224; also online), a poem resonant with the patience and promise of Advent ("The good gift / begins again its descent"). And from another angle on peacemaking, see Berry's classic, "To a Siberian Woodsman" (*New Collected Poems*, p. 107; also online).

DAILY PRACTICES

- Each day this week, either in the morning or the evening (or both), light two candles: a candle of hope, and a candle of peace. Let them remind you to keep awake, and to look for ways to take part in God's *shalom* (Hebrew for "peace," meaning not just the absence of conflict, but the presence of well being).
- Conversation starters: What "change of mind/heart/life" do you long for personally? Communally? Societally? What "chaff" gets in the way? Where do you go when you need a restorative dose of peace?
- Inspired by Berry's "To a Siberian Woodsman," write a letter (poetry or prose) to a person (real or imagined) with whom you feel in conflict, or from whom you feel divided – or rather, *supposedly* divided. What common ground do you share? What peaceful bridge can you build together?
- Some have interpreted the idea of "separating the wheat from the chaff" as an act of division, saving some and not others. But from a farmer's point of view, it's actually an act of refinement: every single grain of wheat has a husk, and separating these husks (collectively called "chaff") is a way of saving every grain of wheat. This raises the question: what "husk" in your life is holding you back, or getting in your way? Write it down on a scrap of paper – and then burn the paper in a fire (a fireplace, campfire, or Advent candle). By the Spirit's grace, Advent is a season of clearing away the chaff!
- Immerse yourself in this week's readings: take a bath and remember your baptism; sit by a fire (or a candle) and remember the Spirit's refining power; and take a walk with Berry and experience how "heaven has come near," overhead and underfoot.



WILD PEACE

Take a field trip this week to a place where you can experience the peace of wild things. Find an evergreen tree or shrub, rest your hand on it, and pray for peace – for yourself, your neighbor, and all creation. Bring a sprig home for your journal.

WEEK THREE
JOY

LIGHT
Three Candles



READ
Matthew 11:2-11

"1986, I: Slowly, slowly, they return,"
by Wendell Berry (*This Day*, p. 71; also online)

> When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me." + Matthew 11:2-6

REFLECT
A forest is many things – including, for Berry, a kind of "timbered choir" singing a joyful song. Why the joy? Because of the healing, the restoration and return of the forest itself: "They are the advent they await."

Healing is like that: it gives rise to joy. When John the Baptizer sends his followers to ask, "Are you the one who is to come?", Jesus tells them to report what they see: the healing and the hallelujahs and the good news being declared to the poor. In a word: the joy. *Tell John about the joy you see, the surest sign that 'the one who is to come' has already begun to arrive…*

And joy, for its part, gives rise to more joy. If the forest is a choir, a rising up of the ground and a coming down of the light, its joyous music, in turn, draws us into the celebration, exalting the forest's

beauty. With a line that sums up the spirit of Advent and Christmas, Berry closes the poem this way: "O light come down to earth, be praised!"

PRAY

God of good news of great joy for all people, let us join your chorus of delight – the gladness of which creation sings, and Mary sings, and every healthy forest sings. Heal our wounds, the wounds we have suffered and the wounds we have made. Show us the joyful signs of your arrival, and make us into one of them. Come, Jesus, come! Amen.

SING

"Joy to the World"
"My Lord, What a Morning"
"Angels We Have Heard on High"

MORE LIGHT

For two other portraits of joy in the living world, see Berry's "Before Dark" and "The Hidden Singer" (*New Collected Poems*, pp. 71 & 241; also online); for his playful case for happiness, see "Why" (*New Collected Poems*, p. 348; also online); and for his joyous romp of prophetic mischief – including the classic line, "Be joyful / though you have considered all the facts" – see "Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front" (*New Collected Poems*, p. 173; also online).

DAILY PRACTICES

- Each day this week, either in the morning or the evening (or both), light three candles: candles of hope, peace, and joy. Let them remind you to keep awake, make peace – and rejoice!



BOUQUET OF JOY

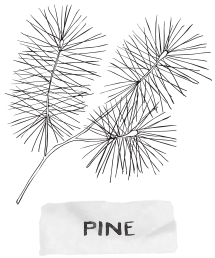
Make your way into the woods for a firsthand experience of a "timbered choir." Bring a friend (or two), sing a few Advent or Christmas carols among the trees, and gather some evergreens into a simple, joyful bouquet.

- Conversation starters: In what places, indoors and outdoors, do you feel most joyful? In your opinion, which landscapes are embodiments of joy? What experiences of healing in your life – physical, emotional, or both – have been a cause for delight?
- Since one sign of the Gospel is health and healing, consider doing one of these this week: participate in a blood drive; contribute to an organization dedicated to public health; improve your own well being with some strength training, a screen sabbath, or some intentional time to connect with friends.
- Speaking of carols, gather a group of singers and volunteer to sing at a local hospital, clinic, hospice, shelter, or other care facility. Give the gift of beauty, comfort, and joy!
- For your Advent journal: Inspired by Berry, describe your own version of a joyful landscape, complete with humans and other creatures. What does it look like, sound like, feel like? What healing, what restoration and return, does the joy celebrate?

FOR YOU SHALL GO OUT IN JOY,
AND BE LED BACK IN PEACE;
THE MOUNTAINS AND THE HILLS
BEFORE YOU SHALL BURST INTO SONG,
AND ALL THE TREES OF THE FIELD
SHALL CLAP THEIR HANDS.
+ ISAIAH 55:12

WEEK FOUR
LOVE

LIGHT
Four Candles



READ
Matthew 1:18-25

"2004, I: A young man leaving home,"
by Wendell Berry (*This Day*, p. 249; also online)

> Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly.
>
> But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."
>
> All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us." + Matthew 1:18-23

REFLECT
Two dreams: Jacob's and Joseph's.

In the ancient story from Genesis, Jacob is on the run, having just tricked his brother, Esau, out of his birthright – a maneuver that likely left Jacob feeling uneasy, afraid, and perhaps even ashamed. But then, asleep in an obscure wilderness, he dreams a vision: a

stairway connecting heaven and earth, with angels ascending and descending. God assures Jacob: rather than being consumed by fear or shame, "Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go" (Gen 28:15). That's the message, the meaning of the astounding ladder: God's loving, intimate companionship. God is with Jacob. Heaven is with earth. Jacob awakens, and calls the place "the house of God…the gate of heaven" (Gen 28:17).

Sometime around the year 1800, the English poet and artist William Blake painted a version of Jacob's dream – and later, Wendell Berry wrote a Sabbath poem inspired by the painting. For Berry, what was true about that ancient, storied place is also true today about every place: "The light and dark are bound, / Heaven to all below, / Bright stair and stony ground." Wherever we are, in all we do, we are immersed in "Heaven's earthly life" – and so every place on earth is "Heaven's gate." The spiral stairway surrounds and connects us all. As Jesus puts it plainly in his opening sermon: "the kingdom of heaven has come near" (Matthew 4:17).

Which brings us to the second dream: Joseph's. Having just discovered that Mary is unexpectedly pregnant, Joseph, too, is uneasy, fearful, and ashamed – for Mary's sake and his own – and plans "to dismiss her quietly." But an angel comes to him in a dream, urging courage and confidence, calling him to stay with Mary and name the baby "Jesus" – and also, Matthew adds, "Emmanuel," or "God is with us." Just as in Jacob's dream, the good news is about God's loving, intimate companionship. Do not be ashamed. God is with us. Heaven is with earth. The spiral stairway surrounds and connects us all – and this time, not only angels will descend and ascend upon it. God will, too. Emmanuel will arrive and dwell with us as one of us, all to help us realize that in every place, no matter how stony or meager or forgotten, we arrive at heaven's gate.

PRAY

God with us, when we are afraid to do what is kind and just, grant us courage. When we are ashamed to do what is right and good, grant us resolve. In the shadows of hate, let us be candles of undaunted love. Show us again the deep, artful kinship of heaven and earth, and let us live our part in heaven's earthly life. Come, Jesus, come! Amen.

SING

"Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming"
"The Cherry Tree Carol"
"Rise Up, Shepherd, and Follow"

MORE LIGHT

With Mary and Joseph in mind, see Berry's "Do Not Be Ashamed" (*New Collected Poems*, p. 82; also online); with Jesus in mind, and in particular, the cosmic vision of the divine *Logos* ("Word") from the Gospel of John, see "1999, IX: The incarnate Word is with us" (*This Day*, p. 203; also online); for a playful love poem, see "The Mad Farmer's Love Song" (*New Collected Poems*, p. 189; also online); and for a poignant, tender love poem, see "To Tanya at Christmas" (*New Collected Poems*, p. 290; also online).

DAILY PRACTICES

- Light four candles every morning and evening this week: candles of hope, peace, joy, and love. Let them remind you to keep awake, make peace, rejoice, and love with courageous generosity.
- Conversation starters: Have you ever had a dream that influenced a decision? Do you live as though "God is with you" as a companion? Why or why not? Berry challenges us to ask if we are "living, then, [our] part / Of Heaven's earthly life? / And what shall be the art / By which this sight can live?" What do these lines make you think and feel?
- Reclaim the art of the handwritten love letter. Get your hands on some beautiful paper and write to a partner, a family member, a friend – whoever comes to mind. Pour out your heart to them. Be specific. Life is too short not to share the love we feel!

EVERGREEN GRATITUDE



What courageous love, what refusal to be ashamed, what resolve to do the right thing have you noticed in someone else recently? Drop the person a line to thank them for their inspiration, and slip a small evergreen sprig into the envelope – for its fragrance and its beauty.

- Choose your favorite art form (drawing, painting, calligraphy, collage) and create a card with God's promise to Jacob: "Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go" (Gen 28:15). Put it on a windowsill or mantle among some evergreens, or nestle it in your Christmas tree. That ancient good news is the essence of Christmas, of Emmanuel, "God with us"!
- Following Blake and Berry, where are the places where you've most vividly sensed "the spiral stairway" between heaven and earth? Revisit one of those places this week.
- Pay attention to your dreams this week, and record them in your Advent journal. Daydreams and imaginative visions count! What meanings can you draw from them? How can you act with more courageous, unashamed love in your everyday life?

AND THEY SHALL NAME HIM "EMMANUEL," WHICH MEANS, "GOD IS WITH US." + MATTHEW 1:23

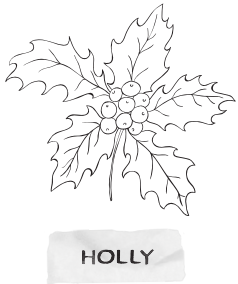
CHRISTMAS EVE

LIGHT

Four Candles, plus the Christ Candle

READ

Luke 2:1-14



"1987, VI: Remembering that it happened once," by Wendell Berry (*This Day*, p. 80; also online)

"The Birth (Near Port William)," by Wendell Berry (*Collected Poems,* p. 124; also online)

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for Mary to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of God shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom God favors!" + Luke 2:1-14

REFLECT

In both of these poems, Berry explores two key theological ideas: first, that heaven and earth are distinct but inseparable, such that they are best understood together; and second, that "Heaven's earthly life" was not only long ago and far away, but also continues here and now.

In "Remembering that it happened once," the story of Jesus' birth helps a farmer see "that we / Ourselves are living in the world / It happened in when it first happened," so much so that "we ourselves" might see the family there, here, today, in the cold and joyful light. Not that we might find our place suddenly, fleetingly holy, but rather that we might at last realize it's been holy all along: "our place / Holy, although we knew it not" – a clear echo of Jacob's exclamation, upon waking from his dream, that "Surely the LORD is in this place; and I knew it not" (Gen 28:16, KJV).

And in "The Birth (Near Port William)," an uncanny encounter – a low singing on the wind, a young family sleeping in a barn, "the child / lying on a bed of straw on the dirt floor" – leads three Kentucky shepherds to a changed view, a changed feeling for the world. A heightened sensitivity to the deep yearnings of creation itself, to a "trust in things / the way animals do," and to how each birth incarnates a desire "to bring together sky and earth, like a stalk / of corn…straining up, rooted in darkness." It's Jacob's stairway again – though this time it extends even lower, not only to human beings asleep on a stone or on straw, but also to the wintertime faith down below, "the wild creatures warm / asleep in their nests, deep underground."

For Wendell Berry, these are the deepest meanings and mysteries of Christmas. That our places, without exception, are holy, though we knew it not. That our bodies, without exception, are holy, garments suitable for God. That every healthy forest is a timbered choir. That every Christmas tree is a spiral stairway, connecting heaven and earth – and indeed that those spirals surround and connect us every day. Wherever we turn, without exception, is heaven's gate.

Tonight we remember "that it happened once" – and for that very reason, with hope, peace, joy, and love, we proclaim that it can and does and will happen here and now.

In short: Christmas is not an otherworldly wall of stone. It is a window through which we can see the world more clearly, a wondrous glimpse of heaven's earthly life.

PRAY

God of hope, peace, joy, and love, God of trees and stars, Mary and Joseph, the shepherds and the magi: thank you for being with us wherever we go. Thank you for bringing hope where there is despair, peace where there is turmoil, joy where there is sorrow, and love where there is hate. Give us the grace, the longing, and the courage to follow you and do the same. Welcome, Jesus, welcome! Amen.

SING

Choose a favorite Christmas carol (or two)!
"The First Noel"
"Silent Night"
"Go Tell It On the Mountain"



ADVENT & CHRISTMAS EVENTS



