



THOUGHTS ON LENT WHILE SHELTERING IN PLACE....

by Craig Bowron

I am 55 years old. I grew up in the 1970's in a comfortably evangelical church that believed that Christ came to save us from our sins; that the Bible was where God wrote out his thoughts, once and for all, and if you were confused about what He was trying to say, you hadn't studied it enough; that Easter hinged heavily on the suffering of Jesus, and the power of life over death.

Our church sat on the edge of a farm field, that sat on the edge of a town, that sat on the edge of an encroaching Chicago. If one sat on the choir side of the sanctuary, and I did, you could look out an open window and stare off into the farm fields and oak savannahs of northern Illinois. Maybe that's where I first ran into the mind of Wendell Berry, though I wouldn't run into him for another decade or so.

While I was off to college and medical school, the suburbs of Chicago laid siege to my hometown, and eventually it surrendered to the tyranny of subdivisions and strip-malls. I worked at a Bible camp during summer break, where my Christian faith matured, even as some branches withered and brought me to these realizations:

It seemed like Christ came to save us from ourselves rather than just our sins.

It seemed like the Bible was really an impressionist painting that had been misfiled as a photograph.

Easter must be much more than a story of how Jesus won the torture contest, because many humans have endured far worse. It was Jesus' miraculous life and not his suffering death that proved his divinity.

It seemed like God was so big that He (or even She) could not be contained inside the church. Thankfully, my life has led me to some truly Godly people, most of them living in exile outside of the Church. Some I met in person, some I met through their music, or in the case of Wendell Berry, through their written work.

I consider Wendell Berry to be one of the wisest people on the planet. I also consider him to be a Godly man, even though, as he openly admits in the prologue of his book of Sabbath poems, he is a fair-weather church goer—and the weather has to be pretty bad to put him in the pew. He'd prefer to be walking the wooded ravines of his Kentucky farm.

I will admit to being somewhat poetically impaired. Some poems, even some of Wendell's poems, seem like a ransom note clipped and pasted together by a frantically illiterate kidnapper. I can't see what they mean to say.

But the entirety of Wendell's work is Biblical in depth and wisdom, and in the way it describes the human condition with clarity and compassion. It is also, to my view, a deeply prophetic voice to a frenetic, inherently violent, consumptive, free-but-entirely-enslaved modern world.



To me, the Bible is still being written, by Wendell and a host of others, and we must seek them out. They must be studied with religious fervor, the kind that produces disciples, not martyrs.

Here are a few excerpts from Wendell's books:

"The ruling ideas of our present national or international economy are competition, consumption, globalism, corporate profitability, mechanical efficiency, technological change, upward mobility—and in all of them there is the implication of acceptable violence against the land and the people. We, on the contrary, must think again of reverence, humility, affection, familiarity, neighborliness, cooperation, thrift, appropriateness, local loyalty. These terms return to us the best of our heritage. They bring us home."

P. 64 *Our Only World*

"When Jesus speaks of having life more abundantly, this, I think, is the life He means: a life that is not reducible by division, category, or degree, but is one thing, heavenly and earthly, spiritual and material, divided only insofar as it is embodied in distinct creatures. He is talking about a finite world that is infinitely holy, a world of time that is filled with life that is eternal. His offer of more abundant life, then, is not an invitation to declare ourselves "Christians," but rather to become conscious, consenting, and responsible participants in the one great life, a fulfillment hardly institutional at all."

P. 136, "The Burden of the Gospels" in the book *The Way of Ignorance and Other Essays*."

And a final quote, a Lenten prayer as we shelter-in-place:

"The present is going by and we are not in it. Maybe when the present is past, we will enjoy sitting in dark rooms and looking at pictures of it, even as the present keeps arriving in our absence."

"Only the present good is good. It is the presence of good—good work, good thoughts, good acts, good places—by which we know that the present does not have to be the nightmare of the future. 'The kingdom of heaven is at hand' because, if not at hand, it is nowhere."

P. 176 *Our Only World*

