

“The Peace of Wild Things”
September 13, 2026

Psalm 148

As all of you know, in recent weeks there have been a few notable American celebrities who have died. I think of Dolly Parton and Gloria Steinem in particular. Overshadowed to some degree by the deaths of these two women was the death of a lesser known, but still noteworthy person in this country.

The person I’m referring to is a man named Wendell Berry, who died in Kentucky on August 31st at the age of 92. There may be some of you who are familiar with Wendell Berry, prolific poet and author. When I am in settings with fellow clergy, he is often someone my colleagues point to as a source of inspiration for their own prayer and devotional lives.

A man who was a lifelong, active and faithful Baptist, Wendell Berry not only wrote poems and novels. He was also an activist, especially when it came to environmental issues. Berry’s activism was rooted in his agricultural background, having grown up as the son of a tobacco farmer. And many of his poems center around rural, agrarian themes with images closely connected to the natural world around us.

As we gather here this morning for what would have been an outdoor worship setting this morning save for the rain, it seems fitting to me to lift up Wendell Berry and to offer to you what is widely considered to be his most famous poem. Written in 1968, it’s a poem whose title is the one I chose for this morning’s sermon...“The Peace of Wild Things.”

*“When despair for the world grows in me and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children’s lives may be, I go and lie down where the
wood drake rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.*

*I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought of grief.*

I come into the presence of still water.

And I feel above me the day-blind stars waiting with their light.

For a time, I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.”

If any of us have ever lost sleep at night worried about the state of the world or worried about the kind of world we are leaving behind for generations who come after us...perhaps all of us fit in this category from time to time...“The Peace of Wild Things” resonates on a deeply personal level.

At the same time, the poem provides a compelling antidote. When our human fear and anxiety overwhelm us, we would do well to look to nature. Watching wood drakes and herons who refuse to abandon the present moment by getting caught up in future stress or sorrow.

Can you and I let go of our daily mental and emotional anguish and our relentless human impulse to try and fix things by resting in the calm rhythms of nature? The flight and the mannerisms of majestic birds? The soothing sound of still water? Waiting stars that beckon to us? Can we let go long enough to lose ourselves in the beauty of God's creation around us?

The notion of letting go of the world's secular demands by finding solace in the world around us is a theme echoed in the words of this morning's Psalm 148. "Praise the Lord...praise God, sun and moon; praise God, all you shining stars, praise God you highest heavens, and you waters above the heavens. Mountains and all hills, fruit trees and all cedars...Wild animals and all cattle, creeping things and flying birds!"

As much as anything else, the Peace of Wild Things poem is about surrendering. Not in the sense that we are waving the white towel and giving up. But rather in the sense that we cast off the burdens that weigh so heavily on us and choose instead to trust in God's simple grace. A grace readily available to any one of us if we slow down and stop long enough to notice...

There was a vacation day for me in August a couple of weeks ago when I was sitting on the shore of Bearcamp Pond up in New Hampshire. It was one of those picture perfect summer days where the toughest choice I had to make was how long to sit in my beach chair and read my book and when to head into the water and go for a swim.

In any case, I was nearing the end of the book I was reading when a group of people decided to go swimming earlier that day. By the time I finished my book I was late and the only one in our group who had not swum yet.

I proceeded to swim about halfway across Bearcamp Pond where there are two islands in the middle of the water. When I reached the first island, I could hear the loud sound of a bird calling out nearby. Not the familiar sound of a loon, which you can often hear on Bearcamp Pond in the summer. Rather a bird whose call I did not recognize.

When I continued to the second island, the sound of the bird grew even louder. So loud, in fact, that I stopped in my swimming tracks and scanned three hundred and sixty degrees around me. Finally, I realized the sound of the bird was so loud that it had to be very close by. So I looked upward and sitting on a branch of a pine tree about ten yards away, maybe fifty feet above my head, was a bald eagle. Magnificent, majestic, unmistakably beautiful. And lo and behold, the eagle was staring directly at me in the water.

It quickly occurred to me that my close proximity to this eagle made me a threatening presence. And my best guess is that the eagle was trying to warn me in as noisy a way as possible to move away. By this point, however, I was completely mesmerized. I slowed down my treading water movements and tried to avoid doing anything distracting. Thereby allowing the eagle to calm down a little bit. In fact, the eagle quieted so much that I didn't feel the need to swim away immediately as the eagle might have preferred.

Sure enough, though, whatever I had been thinking about as I swam across the pond faded from my consciousness. And I found myself thoroughly engrossed watching this eagle. For five or ten minutes straight, I'm guessing, even though I wasn't keeping track of time. All the while, the eagle remained perched on the branch of the pine tree, inspecting the pond and the nearby trees while it moved its trademark white head from side to side. But never once giving me the sense it was about to fly away...

I didn't have a name for it on that vacation day up in New Hampshire, but I'm convinced I found in that bald eagle the peace of wild things Wendell Berry wrote about in his famous poem. Intently watching a bird above my head that was so awesome in size and grandeur it kept me glued to one spot out in the middle of the water for far longer than I could have imagined when I set out swimming from the shore.

Yes, my location in the water unwittingly caused the eagle stress. Yet when I stopped and purposely lowered my own sound, I created the still, silent water the eagle was craving. And the still water that allowed me to gaze upwards at the eagle without posing any danger...

During his lifetime, Wendell Berry had the unique ability to take us into that sacred space where our human nature comes face to face with God's nature. A sacred space where you and I find an elemental truth revealed. In rivers and grasslands and ponds. In oceans and forests. In rainy days and days filled with bright sunshine. In still water and day-blind stars. In wood drakes and great herons and bald eagles that fly overhead until they eventually come to rest on branches high in trees. All those habitats and all the wildlife that dwell in them and depend on them hold for human beings the possibility...the promise of peace.

Now that his earthly life has ended, we pray that Wendell Berry has found another place of peace. Where he can rest freely in God's care in the world beyond this one.

In the meantime, the hope and the prayer for you and for me is the one Wendell Berry described so eloquently. That we too are able to find rest in the grace-filled nature of this world. And in the process of finding rest, be set free from our own worries so that we can live in peace. Amen.