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## Unsung Holiday: Earth Day

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## Unsung Holiday: Earth Day

### Abstract

"What can we do to pass on the gift of good land to our children and their children?"

Posting about our response to Earth Day from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/unsung-holiday-earth-day/>

### Keywords

In All Things, Earth Day, Wendell Berry, land use, gifts

### Disciplines

Christianity

### Comments

*In All Things* is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service at Dordt University](#).

# Unsung Holiday: Earth Day

Channon Visscher

**April 21, 2023**

*In early 1970, U.S. Senator Gaylord Nelson and environmental activist Denis Hayes had been trying to build support for a national event to raise awareness of environmental issues. Seeking a better name than “Environmental Teach-In,” copywriter Julien Koenig suggested “Earth Day”. The event was an enormous success, and Earth Day has been celebrated on April 22 ever since. What is often overlooked, however, is that the original incarnation and name of Earth Day had already taken place on the spring equinox (March 21) of that year. This earlier event was proposed by peace activist and Iowa native John McConnell, who had previously designed the Earth flag in 1968 and wrote the Earth Day proclamation in 1969. McConnell’s (in several ways more expansive) vision for Earth Day was informed by his Christian faith and a passionate plea for peace: “simply stated, every individual and institution on our planet should join in choosing what will eliminate pollution, poverty, and violence,” he wrote, “to do this, we have to address issues in ecology, economics, and ethics.”*

In an era of intensifying ecological challenges, how might we celebrate Earth Day without growing despondent or feeling guilty? How might we prevent it from becoming merely an annual reminder of our environmental failures? How can we cultivate and practice good stewardship in ways that goes beyond a single day in April?

As a guide for observing an Earth Day rooted in a Christian imagination, I’ve found it helpful (as always) to return Wendell Berry’s timeless essay, *The Gift of Good Land*. This work is unapologetically earthly, immanent, and practical: early in the essay he expresses his conviction that “Christianity, as usually presented by its organizations, is not *earthly* enough—that a valid spiritual life, in this world, must have a practice and practicality.” The central argument of *The Gift of Good Land* is right there in the title: that the good (and it is good) land that we inhabit is a *gift* to us—and notably a gift “not given as a reward.” How then, might we prove worthy of this gift? Berry offers a three-part answer to this question, used here as a starting framework for moving beyond observing Earth Day as simply an annual event.

The first response that Berry identifies is that we develop a posture of being “faithful, grateful, and humble” remembering that the land is indeed a gift (Deut 8:10). Cultivating this posture can be as simple as expressing gratitude for our food, clothing, and shelter (all of which are derived from the resources of the Earth), seeking contented joy as we experience the beauty of creation, and practicing curious wonder as we explore and learn more about the world (perhaps even, as a possible Earth Day habit, through a documentary narrated by David Attenborough).

The second is a call to be neighborly. This extends not just to the neighbors and strangers with whom we share the world today, but to both past and future generations. It is a neighborliness akin to the Greek proverb, “a society grows great when old men plant trees in whose shade they shall never sit”. Along these lines, Berry writes of a neighborliness that extends to “the dead who have bequeathed the land to the living, and of the unborn to whom the living will in turn bequeath it.” What can we do to pass on the gift of good land to our children and their children?

The third response is that we would learn to “practice good husbandry” as possessors of the land given to us. Where this task might seem daunting in light of enormous global challenges, a possible way forward might be borrowing a phrase (in turn) from copywriter Julien Koenig (mentioned above), co-creator of one of the most famous ad campaigns for the Volkswagen Beetle: *Think Small*. In what ways can we keep and tend to those parts of creation that *are* within our reach, whether our dorm, or balcony, or backyard? What might it look like to practice this stewardship in our little corner of the world?

This is, in effect, a call to be a gardener. But this noble work was, after all, our first job: to “serve” and “exercise great care over” the garden (Gen 2:15). As Berry writes elsewhere, “the care of the earth is our most ancient and most worth and, after all, our most pleasing responsibility.”<sup>1</sup> Should it be a surprise that we should find the second Adam in the garden?<sup>2</sup> Might we imagine nail-scarred hands dirty with the soil of good land? It is perhaps not so bad to be mistaken as a gardener.

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*Celebrations, holidays, traditions. Many memories attach themselves to special moments outside the daily rhythms of ordinary life. Often connected with food, smells, stories, and participation, how and what do you pause to celebrate? Maybe some of these “Unsung Holidays” will inspire you to gather people, create a new memory, and celebrate a beauty within God’s world.*

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1. Berry, Wendell. *The Art of the Commonplace: The Agrarian Essays*.