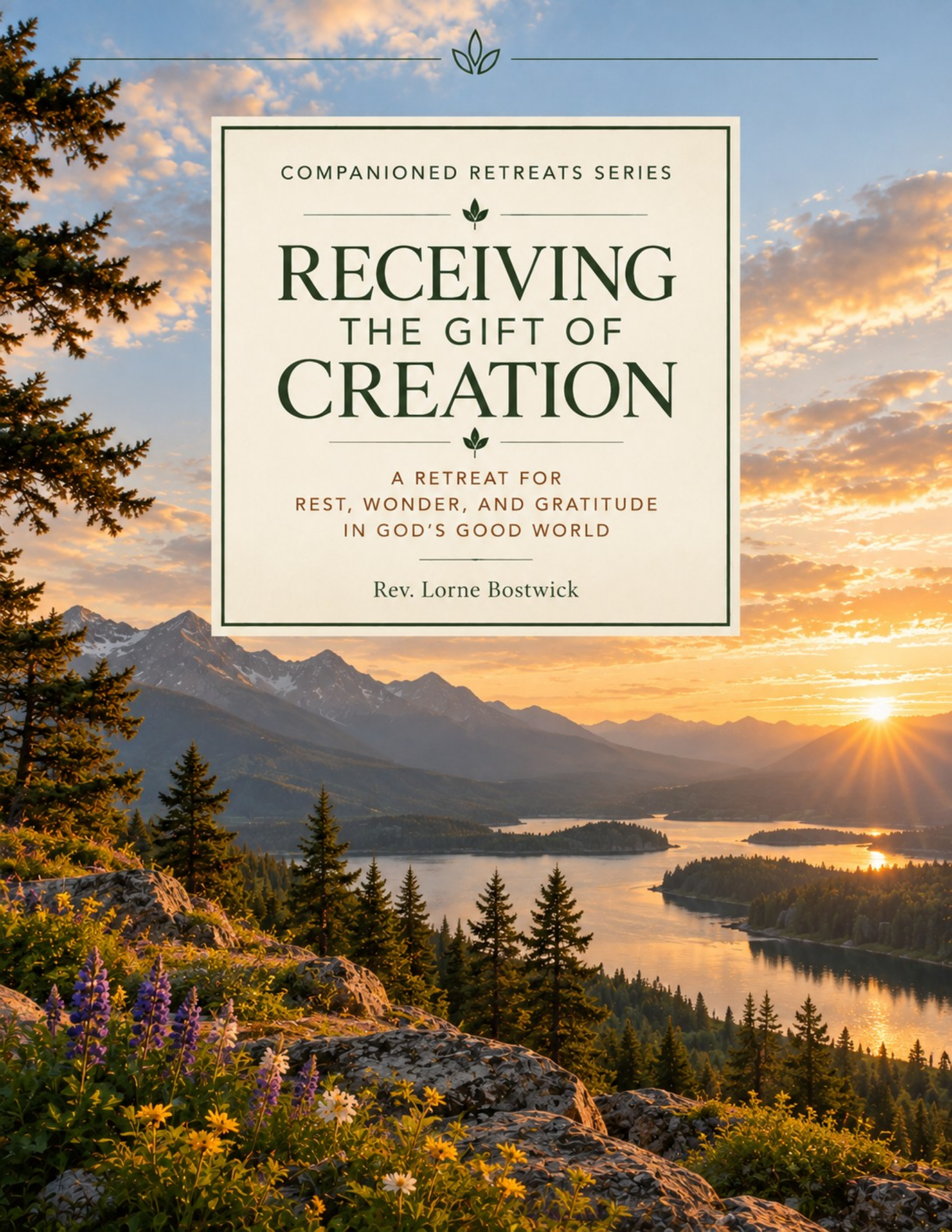
COMPANIONED RETREATS SERIES
RECEIVING
THE GIFT OF
CREATION
A RETREAT FOR
REST, WONDER, AND GRATITUDE
IN GOD'S GOOD WORLD
Rev. Lorne Bostwick

Receiving the Gift of Creation

A Companioned Retreat with the Natural World

[Insert the approved Common Introduction here.]

Receiving the Gift of Creation

Before you came here, creation was already happening.

Water was moving.

Plants were turning toward light.

Roots were drawing nourishment from soil.

Birds were feeding.

Insects were pollinating.

Things were growing.

Things were dying.

Something was becoming food for something else.

Wind was carrying seed.

Clouds were gathering and dispersing.

The earth was turning.

None of it waited for you.

And none of it requires you to make these days meaningful.

You have come into a world already alive with the generosity of God.

For these days, creation is not merely the scenery for your retreat. Let it become one of your companions.

Receive its beauty.

Depend upon its providence.

Discover its rhythms.

Rest within what continues without your management.

Find your place among lives other than your own.

And eventually, perhaps, tend something you have learned to love.

There is a movement beneath these days:

Gift → Receiving → Sabbath → Dependence → Belonging → Tending → Blessing

You do not need to make that movement happen.

Let the place lead you.

Choosing a Place

Let Creation Help Choose the Retreat

There is no ideal setting for this retreat.

A spectacular landscape is not necessarily more sacred than an ordinary one. Desert and rainforest reveal different gifts. A farm and a wilderness disclose different relationships. A cultivated garden can be as worthy of attention as a mountain.

Choose somewhere that will allow you to encounter creation rather than merely look at it.

You might choose:

- a retreat center surrounded by woods, prairie, mountains, desert, farmland, or water;
- a cabin in a state or national park;
- a hotel, lodge, or inn in an extraordinary natural setting;
- a tent or camper in a campground;
- a backpacking trip, if you have the experience and physical ability to make the journey restorative rather than an endurance test;
- a hike to a backcountry cabin or lodge;
- a mountain or ski resort during summer, when slopes become meadows, trails, streams, exposed rock, and wildflowers;
- a lake where you can canoe, kayak, swim, float, fish, or sit beside the water;
- a canoe or kayak trip with a safe campsite, cabin, or lodge as your base;
- a professionally guided whitewater rafting trip incorporated into the retreat;
- an ocean, bay, island, or coastal setting;
- a quiet beach;
- a desert or the red-rock country of the Southwest;
- a redwood or other old-growth forest;
- a temperate rainforest;
- a place known for rivers, springs, waterfalls, or wetlands;

- prairie or grassland, where sky, wind, distance, and subtle changes become the landscape;
- a working farm, vineyard, orchard, or ranch;
- a botanical garden, great public garden, or arboretum;
- a monastery or abbey with gardens, orchards, farmland, woods, or extensive grounds;
- a wildlife refuge or conservation area;
- a cabin beside a river;
- a safely anchored boat or houseboat, if you have the experience to make that appropriate;
- or a comfortable rural inn from which you can explore several different landscapes.

Don't assume that the more rugged setting is the more spiritual one.

You may encounter creation while carrying everything you need on your back.

You may encounter it from a comfortable lodge overlooking a mountain valley.

You may encounter it kneeling in the soil of a working farm.

You may encounter it walking through a garden someone has tended for fifty years.

Choose the place that will allow you to become attentive.

Before You Come

Pack for the place you have chosen.

Bring your Bible and whatever clothing and equipment will allow you to be comfortable and safe. Depending on the setting, that might include good shoes, a swimsuit, binoculars, a camera, a sketchbook or watercolors, something comfortable to sit on outdoors, or equipment for hiking, camping, or paddling.

You don't need all of these.

Bring what belongs to the place.

And learn what the place requires of you.

Weather matters. So do wildlife, water, tides, fire, altitude, desert heat, trail conditions, and your own physical capacities.

Adventure can be part of this retreat.

Unnecessary danger does not need to be.

Beyond that, you don't need to bring much.

Creation has already packed for you.

When You Arrive

Go Meet the Place

Once you have settled in, go meet the place.

Leave the Bible behind for now.

Leave the journal.

Don't take photographs yet.

Don't try to identify everything.

Don't begin by asking what any of it means.

Let the place introduce itself.

Perhaps you will sit on a dock.

Stand among trees.

Enter a garden.

Put your hand on the earth.

Look across the desert.

Stand beside a vineyard.

Watch a river.

Lie in the grass.

Look toward a mountain.

Feel the wind.

Listen.

What is here?

Not what does it symbolize.

Not what sermon illustration does it suggest.

What is here?

Stay until you begin noticing things you did not notice when you arrived.

There is nowhere else you need to be.

And God Saw That It Was Good

Later, return to Genesis 1.

You don't need to study the chapter.

Read until you begin hearing its refrain:

“And God saw that it was good.”

Light.

Good.

Earth and vegetation.

Good.

Sun and moon and stars.

Good.

Water filled with living things.

Good.

Birds in the air.

Good.

Animals moving across the earth.

Good.

Human beings within this living creation.

And finally:

“God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good.”

You have already encountered something of that world today.

Go back to it if you want.

Before you decide what creation can teach you, allow Scripture to give you one word with which to receive it:

Good.

Not useful.

Not productive.

Not a resource.

Not scenery.

Good.

Let Evening Be Evening

Eat when you are hungry.

If your food came from the place around you, notice that.

Fresh vegetables.

Fruit from an orchard.

Bread.

Local fish.

Something grown on the farm.

Something produced at the vineyard.

Or perhaps dinner came from a grocery store hundreds of miles away.

It still came from creation.

Soil.

Water.

Plants.

Animals.

Sunlight.

Human hands.

Taste what is before you.

Then let evening become evening.

Perhaps watch the light change.

Sit beside a fire.

Listen to rain.

Watch water.

Notice what becomes audible as human activity quiets.

Or do none of those things.

There is nothing else you need to accomplish tonight.

The World Will Continue

Before sleep, consider stepping outside once more if it is safe.

Much of what surrounds you is settling into darkness.

Other lives are only beginning their day.

Tonight, while you sleep, the river will keep moving.

Trees and plants will continue their life.

Nocturnal creatures will emerge.

Tides will rise and fall.

Somewhere rain will fall.

Seeds will wait beneath soil.

The earth will continue turning.

You are part of this creation.

You are not responsible for keeping it going.

If you want words for the night, borrow these from Psalm 4:8:

“I will both lie down and sleep in peace; for you alone, O LORD, make me lie down in safety.”

Then sleep.

Sabbath

Let Creation Care for You

Don't hurry into the morning.

Creation does not need anything from you right now.

For a while, let yourself be the creature who receives.

Perhaps sit in the garden.

Float on the lake.

Watch the river.

Lie beneath the trees.

Look across the desert.

Sit on a porch and watch rain.

Stand among redwoods.

Look over a field.

Watch morning arrive over the mountains.

Feel the wind.

Listen to birds.

Drink coffee slowly.

Eat something good.

Or simply remain where you are.

Let something be beautiful without needing to do anything about it.

You are not wasting the morning.

This is Sabbath.

In Genesis, God's Sabbath follows God's seeing.

God sees what has been made.

God calls it very good.

And God rests.

For a while, let seeing, goodness, and rest belong together.

Do not tend anything yet.

Before you care for creation, let creation care for you.

Providence

You Are Being Kept Alive

Later, take Psalm 104 somewhere you would like to remain for a while.

Read it slowly enough to notice its world.

Water.

Mountains.

Springs.

Wild animals.

Birds.

Trees.

Grass.

Plants cultivated for food.

Wine.

Oil.

Bread.

Moon.

Sun.

Darkness.

Sea.

Creatures beyond counting.

The Psalm is alive with provision.

Now locate yourself inside it.

You need water.

Drink some.

You need food.

Eat something.

You need air.

Breathe.

You need shelter.

Notice what shelters you.

You need darkness and sleep.

You need other living things.

You are not standing outside creation admiring it.

You are being kept alive within it.

Take one ordinary thing that sustains you.

A glass of water.

A piece of bread.

An apple.

A grape.

A tomato.

A handful of berries.

Hold it.

Before this reached your hand, there was sun.

Water.

Soil.

Seed.

Growth.

Perhaps pollination.

Harvest.

Human labor.

Transportation.

Preparation.

Time.

There are gifts you receive every day without knowing the names of those who made your receiving possible.

Eat.

Drink.

Let dependence feel less like weakness and more like belonging.

Encounter Something You Cannot Manage

What happens next depends on where you are.

Perhaps paddle.

Hike.

Join the rafting trip.

Stand beside the ocean.

Walk beneath enormous trees.

Sit at the edge of a canyon.

Reach an overlook within your abilities.

Watch a waterfall.

Feel strong wind.

Look across miles of prairie.

Sit among desert rock.

Enter a garden so intricate that you cannot take it all in.

If you are in whitewater, feel the force of water beneath the raft and the difference between working with the river and imagining you can command it.

If you are paddling, notice the current and wind.

If you are in the mountains, notice scale.

If you are beneath redwoods, look up.

If you are beside the ocean, watch wave after wave arrive without your assistance.

Creation is gift.

It is not domesticated for your convenience.

When there is time and space for Scripture, read some of Job 38–39.

God speaks of rain, snow, stars, wild animals, mountains, birth, hunger, weather, and creatures whose lives do not revolve around human purposes.

You do not need to make yourself insignificant in order to receive this.

You are simply not the center of everything.

Perhaps that can be freedom.

What Belongs to What Here?

At some point during these days, remain in one place long enough to stop seeing only individual things.

Begin noticing relationships.

A flower and a pollinator.

Shade and undergrowth.

Water and roots.

Bird and tree.

Fungi and fallen wood.

Rock and current.

Soil and vine.

Pasture and animal.

Wind and grass.

Decay and new growth.

Human hands and garden.

Trail and the people who maintain it.

Ask:

What belongs to what here?

Then watch.

Very little exists by itself.

Eventually, another question may come:

Where am I in this?

Not as observer.

As participant.

You breathe what plants release.

Plants use what you exhale.

You eat.

You drink.

You depend.

You affect.

You receive.

You belong.

Harmony

Harmony is not a world in which nothing dies.

It does not mean storms never come.

It does not erase predator and prey, abundance and scarcity, competition and cooperation, disturbance and regeneration.

Harmony is not sameness.

It is life existing in relationship.

Sometimes human beings participate beautifully in those relationships.

A gardener works with soil.

A vineyard keeper tends a vine.

A farmer plants and waits.

A trail crew protects fragile ground by giving human feet somewhere to go.

A paddler learns to read the current.

Sometimes we participate destructively.

But for now, you do not need to resolve the whole human relationship with creation.

Notice what harmony feels like when you encounter it.

Perhaps you are not outside it looking in.

Perhaps you belong within it.

When Gratitude Comes

There does not need to be a scheduled moment for gratitude.

It may have already appeared.

Perhaps while eating.

Perhaps when light moved through trees.

Perhaps in the middle of whitewater.

Perhaps when a bird landed nearby.

Perhaps when you looked across the desert.

Perhaps when you realized how good the water tasted.

Perhaps nothing dramatic happened at all.

If gratitude comes, let it come.

Don't immediately turn it into a list.

Let it find its own form.

Maybe gratitude wants words.

Give it words.

Maybe it wants music.

Sing.

Play.

Listen.

Maybe it wants your body.

Stand.

Kneel.

Lift your hands.

Maybe gratitude simply wants you to remain where you are and love what has been given.

And perhaps gratitude will turn your attention toward the One who gives.

Let it.

Join the Praise

At some point, when praise seems possible, take Psalm 148 with you.

Read it aloud if you can.

Sun and moon.

Shining stars.

Mountains and hills.

Fruit trees and cedars.

Wild animals and cattle.

Creeping things and flying birds.

People young and old.

The Psalm imagines creation already praising.

When you have finished reading, listen to the place.

Birdsong.

Wind.

Water.

Insects.

Leaves.

Frogs.

Night creatures.

Silence.

Whatever is there.

You do not need to make creation worship.

Join it.

Speak praise.

Sing.

Play an instrument.

Stand silently.

Raise your hands.

Bow.

Laugh.

Cry.

Love the God who gives.

Or simply remain there.

Worship does not have to become another thing you accomplish.

Sometimes praise is what rises when you finally recognize how much you have received.

If the Night Is Clear

If conditions allow it safely, spend some time outside after dark.

Once you are settled, turn off unnecessary light.

Give your eyes time to adjust.

Stars, if they are visible.

Clouds, if they aren't.

Moonlight, if the moon is present.

Darkness, if nothing else can be seen.

Listen to the night.

Feel the temperature.

Notice how different the place has become.

If you want Scripture, take Psalm 8:

“When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established…”

Then look.

You are small.

You matter.

Both can be true.

Tending What You Have Received

Only after you have spent substantial time receiving should you turn toward tending.

Read Genesis 2:15:

“The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it.”

Human beings are not only recipients within creation.

We participate.

If you are at a farm, vineyard, orchard, garden, monastery, or retreat center, perhaps there is something you may appropriately help tend.

Water.

Weed.

Harvest.

Feed animals.

Turn compost.

Gather fallen fruit.

Sweep a garden path.

If you are in a park, forest, beach, campground, or trail area, perhaps pick up litter where doing so is safe and permitted.

If you are camping, care well for your site.

If you are paddling, leave the shoreline undisturbed.

Perhaps there is nothing for you to do.

Then notice the tending that has already made your experience possible.

Someone maintained this trail.

Someone protected this land.

Someone planted this garden.

Someone preserved this forest.

Someone restored this river.

Someone kept this place available for people they would never meet.

Human participation is not always intrusion.

Tending can be one of the ways we participate in creation's flourishing.

Do something small if there is something appropriate to do.

You don't need to save the earth today.

Care for what is within reach.

Receive. Tend. Receive Again.

A gardener does not make the seed grow.

A vineyard keeper does not manufacture life inside the vine.

A farmer cannot command rain.

A person restoring a habitat works with lives and processes already present.

Human tending begins with gifts already given.

Receive.

Tend.

Receive again.

Perhaps this is one form of harmony.

The earth gives.

Human hands respond.

And faithful tending may allow what has been received to become gift again.

Fruit for another table.

Shade for someone not yet born.

Clean water downstream.

Habitat for another creature.

A trail someone else can walk.

Beauty another person will someday receive.

Blessing What Has Blessed You

Before you leave, return, if you can, to one place that has mattered during these days.

Perhaps the place where you first sat.

The dock.

The tree.

The garden.

The shoreline.

The overlook.

The vineyard.

The river.

The field.

The desert rock.

The trail.

Notice whether you encounter it differently now.

You came here to receive.

And you have been receiving all along.

Perhaps beauty.

Food.

Water.

Rest.

Wonder.

Shade.

Adventure.

Silence.

Delight.

Perspective.

Perhaps the reminder that the world continues when you stop working.

Perhaps the recognition that your life depends upon lives other than your own.

Perhaps gratitude became praise.

Perhaps praise became love.

And love may eventually ask:

How might I bless what has blessed me?

Don't turn the question into a program before you leave.

Carry it gently.

Perhaps someday it will become a garden.

A tree.

A changed habit.

A protected place.

A cleaner stream.

Support for someone who tends land well.

A child taught to love the living world.

Perhaps it will simply make you more attentive to what you have been receiving all along.

For now, bless this place.

Use your own words.

Or perhaps:

For the beauty I have received, thank you.

For the life that sustains my life, thank you.

For what I have seen and what I never noticed, thank you.

For what continues without me, thank you.

For the gift of belonging, thank you.

Then look once more.

You do not need to take the place home with you.

You are already carrying something of its gift.

Going Home

You are leaving this place.

Creation is not.

The river will continue.

The garden will grow.

Leaves will fall.

Fruit will ripen.

Rain will come somewhere.

Seeds will wait.

Animals will sleep and wake.

The earth will turn.

And you will return to the ordinary places of your life.

But you are not leaving creation behind.

The water from your faucet comes from somewhere.

Your food grows somewhere.

Weather moves across your home.

Birds live outside your window.

Soil lies beneath streets and buildings.

Your own body remains a creaturely body—breathing, eating, drinking, sleeping, aging, depending.

The gift goes home with you because you have always been inside it.

You do not have to carry the whole earth.

You were never asked to.

Receive what God gives.

Give thanks.

Love the Giver.

Tend what has been entrusted to you.

Bless what has blessed you.

And sometimes, stop.

Look.

Listen.

Rest.

Notice what is still being given.

The light.

The water.

The food.

The breath.

The life around you.

The life within you.

Receive it again.

And join creation in saying:

It is good.