"Some keep the Sabbath going to Church" was one of those handful of poems published during Dickinson's lifetime. The poem appeared in a publication called the *Round Table* on March 12, 1864. It was printed with the title "My Sabbath," and it is possible that Dickinson herself gave it this title.

As you read this poem and consider how to write about it, you will find fewer problems of interpretation than you are likely to encounter in other Dickinson poems. "Some keep the Sabbath going to Church" announces its subject in the first line. The idea behind the poem, though it may have been shocking to some readers in 1864, will not trouble many now. The poem's speaker suggests that while some go to church to practice their religion and to be close to God, it is possible to be close to Him (perhaps closer than one can be in the church) in nature. The speaker says of the Sabbath: "I keep it, staying at Home" (2). In that line is one theme of this poem and of many of Dickinson's other works, the superiority of home to anywhere else.

As the poem continues, an elaborate metaphor of home as church is developed. Every element you might expect to find in a conventional church service is here replaced by a natural occurrence. Dickinson moves the reader to consider whether the service humankind has created could ever rival God's own creation. Although the answer may seem blasphemous, it is rather obvious that it could not.

If you read biographical material about Dickinson, you will learn that she did not attend church services after she began to seclude herself. You will also learn that home was to her a sacred place and perhaps that she lavished much care upon the gardens of her home. In such lines as "God preaches, a noted Clergyman— / And the sermon is never long" (9–10), you may recognize Dickinson's satiric tone. The poem concludes with the following statement: "So instead of getting to Heaven, at last— / I'm going, all along" (11–12). In those lines you might hear Dickinson's self-confidence, as well as her belief that she was able to approach God without a mediator.

**Topics and Strategies**

This section of the chapter will seek to provide you with various approaches you might take in writing a paper about this poem. These ideas are by no means exhaustive and should be looked at as a starting point for your own investigation.

**Themes**

Although this poem sings the virtues of "staying at Home," its real setting is a garden. The garden is a common setting for a religious experience. The Garden of Gethsemane, for instance, and Jesus' time there, is a well known biblical story. The garden is also a setting of beauty and abundance, and so may be considered symbolic of God's wonders and gifts. The poem follows the biblical injunction to remember the Sabbath and keep it holy (Exodus 20:8–11). The Bible does not say that this should be done in a church.

For Dickinson, there was no one place as important to her as the house that is now called the Dickinson Homestead. Reading through her poems or letters, the idea of home occurs often. She seemed to have conceived of her home as its own universe. And so it is not surprising that her home should have also had a church. For some people, church is an idea that is carried along inside. Worship, of course, needs no specific place.

Another theme present in Dickinson's poem is the idea that paradise may be present in this world. Certainly, the scene described by the poem is idyllic. The final two lines are: "So instead of getting to Heaven, at last— / I'm going, all along" (11–12). There is something quite moving about those lines. Not only do they show Dickinson's self-assurance—she does not seem to doubt that heaven is her clear destination—but they also show disbelief that any idea of renunciation or unhappiness on Earth will guarantee a later reward. All rewards are already present.
Inherent in the poem is the idea of a personal religion. To those who were seated at a Sunday service while Dickinson was in her garden, this idea would likely seem blasphemous. However, in Dickinson's work, personal conversations with God are the norm. He does not necessarily answer, but Dickinson is not shy about speaking to him and believes he hears.

Sample Topics:

1. The garden: How does "Some keep the Sabbath going to Church" make the argument that a garden is an apt place for worship?
   
   To make the above argument, Dickinson draws parallels between her garden and the church. One way to write this paper would be to discuss each of those parallels and how accurate they seem to be. For instance, when she talks of wearing her "wings" (6), Dickinson refers to a 19th-century fashion in the drape of her sleeve. But, for many readers, "wings" will evoke a picture of the angelic.

2. Church vs. home: How is the value of a place determined?
   
   One possible thesis on this topic is that Dickinson's "Some keep the Sabbath going to Church" argues that home is superior to a church for religious experience. Some evidence in support of this would be that "God preaches" (9) the speaker's service. Is God both in her garden and at the church? Or is he just in her garden?

3. Paradise vs. this world: How does one obtain paradise while yet in this world?
   
   "Some keep the Sabbath going to Church" portrays paradise as easily reachable. Dickinson often expressed disbelief that paradise could be superior to the world we know. One thesis that you might pursue on this topic is that Dickinson portrays the world as if it were paradise. Therefore, trying to "reach" paradise becomes unnecessary.

4. Personal religion: How does "Some keep the Sabbath going to Church" seem to form the tenets of a personal religion?
   
   Dickinson's poem replaces the usual characters and events of a Sunday service with the creatures and occurrences in her garden. When line two of the poem opens, "I keep it," the reader is alerted to the fact that while "some" may keep the Sabbath one way, this is the way "I" keep it. The speaker lets us know this is a solitary activity. You might approach an essay on this topic by discussing other instances of "I" in the poem. What does the speaker do? How does her religion differ from most? How close is she to God and to heaven?

Compare and Contrast Essays

Poem #1591—"The Bobolink is gone" is one of many Dickinson poems, including "Some kept the Sabbath going to Church," that features the bobolink, a songbird. In the latter poem, the bobolink is Dickinson's "Chorister" (3). In "The Bobolink is gone," he plays a similar role. When he departs, "The Presbyterian Birds / Can now resume the Meeting" (4–5). Unlike those birds, he has no sense of decorum. For the bobolink, religion is passionate and personal. It knows no rules.

In #18—"The Gentian weaves her fringes," Dickinson makes the connection she sees between religion and nature even more explicit than she does in "Some keep the Sabbath going to Church." Again, the bobolink appears. Here, he and Dickinson meet, along with an "aged Bee" (11), to mark the passing of summer. The conclusion of the poem is a prayer, but one uniquely addressed to the natural world: "In the name of the Bee— / And of the Butterfly— / And of the Breeze—Amen!" (17–19).

Poem #1545—"The Bible is an antique Volume" draws parallels between the biblical stories and romantic tales. Even more than "Some keep the Sabbath going to Church," this poem might be judged as blasphemous. The first three lines are as follows: "The Bible is an antique Volume— / Written by faded Men / At the suggestion of Holy Spectres." Line five identifies "Eden—the ancient Homestead," and we again meet the idea of paradise as a homelike place. She puts the words believe and lost in quotation marks, throwing their common usage in Christian teaching into question. The poem's final lines suggest that poetry would be a welcome replacement for Christianity. Dickinson writes, "Had but the Tale a warbling Teller— / All the Boys would come— / Orpheus' Sermon captivated— / It did not condemn" (13–16).
The first line of Dickinson's #79—"Going to Heaven!" seems to echo the final line of "Some keep the Sabbath going to Church." "Going to Heaven!" reflects on the idea that the poem's speaker will eventually reside there. The first stanza lets her surety of this be known. She writes that "it will be done / As sure as flocks go home at night / Unto the Shepherd's arm!" (8–10). In the second stanza, the poet refers to heaven as "home" (19). The third stanza makes clear her love for the world she currently dwells in. If you were to contrast this poem with "Some keep the Sabbath going to Church," you might remark on the similarities these two poems share while pointing out that "Going to Heaven!" displays a very conventional religious belief.

Sample Topics:

1. **The bobolink**: How does Dickinson portray this bird as the speaker's kin?

   A possible thesis on this topic would be that in #1591—"The Bobolink is gone" and in "Some keep the Sabbath going to Church," the bird is a stand-in for the poet. The idea of the poet as bird is a common one. They both create song. In these two poems, the bird worships alongside her. Like the speaker, he is disruptive. He does not belong in a more conventional service.

2. **Prayer**: How do nature and religion coexist in these two poems?

   In "The Gentian weaves her fringes," another church service occurs in nature. This time, it is a funeral service. If you were to compare this poem to "Some keep the Sabbath going to Church," you might argue that Dickinson finds in nature all the elements required for religious practice.

3. **Poetry**: Does Dickinson suggest that the Bible is just another set of stories, better told by a poet?

   "The Bible is an antique Volume" contrasts nicely with "Some keep the Sabbath going to Church." In both poems, you will see some mention of home. Perhaps in the adjective **warbling**, you will be reminded of the bobolink. Both poems share a distrust or disdain for conventional religious thought and practice. However, one poem sees in nature an alternative for religion, while the other sees poetry as its proper replacement.

4. **Heaven**: How does Dickinson's view of heaven change, while her belief in heaven as her final destination does not waver?

   "Going to Heaven!" displays, like "Some keep the Sabbath going to Church," a surety about heaven and the speaker's place there. If you were to write an essay contrasting these two poems, you might focus on the more conventional message of "Going to Heaven!" You might also argue that there are signs of doubt about religion in both or that her love of the things of this world shows in both poems.

**Further Information**


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