



# Liturgical Season of Creation

## Daily Devotional

September 1<sup>st</sup> to October 4<sup>th</sup>, 2022

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## LIST OF READINGS

The Wholeness of Creation .....	5
We are all Gardeners.....	6
Ruling as God’s Image Bearers.....	7
No Excuse .....	8
The Intrinsic Value of Non-Human Life .....	9
God’s Covenant with Non-Human Life.....	10
For God So Loved the Cosmos.....	11
God Wants All Creatures to Thrive.....	12
In the Beginning, God... ..	13
From Dust to Dust... ..	14
Environmental Consequences of Sin.....	15
Ecological Sin?.....	16
The Land is a Spiritual Barometer .....	17
In Him all Things Hold Together .....	18
Nothing is Wasted .....	19
The Sabbath Year .....	20
Living Water.....	21
Old-Growth Forests .....	22
The Idolatry of Consumerism and Materialism .....	23
Contentment.....	24
Roots.....	25
Creation is Groaning.....	26
Hiking the Way.....	27
Places of Solitude .....	28
Esau - First Fast Food Casualty.....	29
The Principle of Sustainability.....	30
Loving Your Neighbor in the Anthropocene Age .....	31
Who Owns the Land? .....	32
Care of Animals .....	33
ABOUT THE AUTHOR.....	34

## INTRODUCTION

Each year September 1<sup>st</sup> to October 4<sup>th</sup> is a period in Ordinary Time in the liturgical year set aside for specific emphasis on care of creation. The Season of Creation is now celebrated by a growing global ecumenical movement across the extended Christian family.

During the month-long Season of Creation, Christians from around the world come together to praise our Creator for the wonderful works of creation as well as renew and recommit to our God-ordained responsibilities to lovingly care for the world, our common home, with which we have been entrusted. This formal liturgical season helps Christians to recognize that care of creation is not just an Earth Care movement but a requirement of our faith.

The season begins on September 1<sup>st</sup> which is celebrated as the World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation. This date is traditionally the first day of the liturgical year for the Orthodox churches and it was the Ecumenical Patriarch Dimitrios I who first proposed September 1<sup>st</sup> as a day of prayer for the Orthodox in 1989. The season ends on October 4<sup>th</sup>, the date that some traditions recognize as the Feast of St. Francis of Assisi, the patron saint of animals and ecology.

The following daily devotionals are offered to serve as reflection points during the Season of Creation in the hope of spurring ideas and action. There is an entry for each day during the season except for Sundays. The selected Scriptures are representative verses, in no specific order, reflecting the theme of care of creation found in Scripture. This is by no means a systematic study.

The idea of caring for creation presents a challenge to many modern Christians. First, most modern Christians are divorced from the realities of the natural world, yet it is against the backdrop of creation that the metanarrative of the Bible plays out. Second, many Christians have a misunderstanding of God's call to exercise dominion over creation. Dominion in our culture implies flawed assumptions about the rights and power of humans over the natural world. Dominion is falsely associated with domination. Fallen humans have a flawed view of dominion which has resulted in the destruction and desecration of creation. Those redeemed in Christ are called to exercise dominion as God originally intended – to act as agents of God's common grace to protect and serve creation.

Perhaps there has never been a more critical time in the history of the Earth for those redeemed in Christ to understand and live out the creation care mandates found in Scripture.

### Disclaimer

Whenever a text is considered in isolation, there is always a danger of taking it out of context and reading into it meaning that was never intended or implied. This work is no different. The reader is thus encouraged to review the selected verses within their original immediate and broader contexts for themselves.

*The Wholeness of Creation*

*And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.*

Genesis 1:31 (ESV)

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At the end of six days of creating, God looked at everything He had made and pronounced it to be very good. On five previous occasions during the week of creation and in reference to some specific part of His creation, we read, “*And God saw that it was good*” (vv. 10, 12, 18, 21, and 25). If God saw that the various components of His creation were good, then when taken together as a whole, an interconnected system, He declared the completed whole as very good. The more that scientists from various disciplines have studied the cosmos, the Earth, and nature, the depth, complexity, and the inter-connectedness of the various processes, cycles, and rhythms that sustain creation are revealed. This is true whether it involves the macro systems that regulate the Earth or the internal biochemical processes within a single cell. If anything, general revelation confirms the awesomeness of God’s entirety of creation revealed in the first chapter of Genesis.

We are left with two unmistakable conclusions highlighted (along with others) in the 202<sup>nd</sup> General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA)’s Restoring Creation policy:

- God's works in creation are too wonderful, too ancient, too beautiful, too good to be desecrated.
- Human life and well-being depend upon the flourishing of other life and the integrity of the life-supporting processes that God has ordained.

[[http://pma.pcusa.org/site\\_media/media/uploads/environment/pdf/restoring-creation-for-ecology&justice.pdf](http://pma.pcusa.org/site_media/media/uploads/environment/pdf/restoring-creation-for-ecology&justice.pdf)]

Those of us who acknowledge the Earth as God’s creation must respond to the natural world with respect and care.

**Prayer**

Eternal God of life, we give you all our praise and thanksgiving for the many wonders of creation. We acknowledge our slowness to understand the gift of deep connection between all creation. Now more than ever, may we all feel interconnected and interdependent – to our world and each other, and recognize that we are not separate from creation but a part of it. We pray that we may be loving and able stewards of this world. Make us courageous in embracing the changes required in our lives. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

**Reflection/Action**

What interconnections within the natural world do you observe in your daily life? What has the COVID-19 pandemic revealed about interconnections in our world?

Organize a talk on creation care in your faith community.

**\*\*\*Today is the World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation\*\*\***

## *We are all Gardeners*

*The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it.*

Genesis 2:15 (ESV)

The earliest Greek translation of this Hebrew Scripture (The Septuagint) used “*paradeisos*” rendered as “garden.” This is where the English word “paradise” originates. It is also the same Greek word used in Luke’s Gospel when Jesus said to the believing criminal crucified alongside him: “*Truly, I say unto you, today you will be with me in Paradise.*” We get a sense just how special the garden was – a place designed specifically to meet every human need, a sense of luxury beyond comprehension, a land of abundance, and a place where humans could be in a direct relationship with God. The garden was literally heaven on Earth.

Before sin entered the world, humans were given a purpose – to work and keep the garden, or to serve and preserve. God designed creation specifically to include human work to accomplish His purpose. After the Fall, all this changed. Not only did the relationship between God and humans change, the relationship between humans and creation also changed.

Today, we define wilderness as follows: “A wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his works dominate the landscape, is hereby recognized as an area where the Earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain” (*The Wilderness Act of 1964*).

It is ironic how unlike the original paradise which required humans to work and keep it, today we are drawn to wilderness areas because, by definition, they are untrammelled by humans. Our abuse of creation has required us to develop legislation to protect our wilderness areas and areas of natural beauty from ourselves!

In our imperfect world we must strive to keep (*shamar* - to care for, to protect) all creation as it is today in our time and place. No matter to what other specific purpose God may have called us, caring for creation remains a responsibility we all share. Caring for creation is a means by which we honor God whose glory, power, majesty, and wisdom are woven throughout creation. If we desecrate creation, we rob God of His glory.

### **Prayer**

Almighty God, Creator of the Universe, fill us with your love for your creation, for the natural world around us, for the Earth from which we come and to which we will soon return. Awake in us energy and passion to work for your world; let us never fall into complacency or ignorance by the task before us. Help us to restore, remake, and renew. In Jesus name we pray. Amen.

[Prayer adapted from Anne Richards, Mission Theology Advisory Group, Resources available on [www.ctbi.org.uk](http://www.ctbi.org.uk) *The Dispossession Project: Eco-House*]

### **Reflection/Action**

What specific assignment has God given you to care for His creation? Look around you. This is where God has placed you. It might not be the garden, but what opportunities exist right here, right now?

Prioritize creation care as a ministry in your church.

### *Ruling as God's Image Bearers*

*Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.*

Genesis 1:26-27 (ESV)

After six days of creating, God creates humans. God says, "*Let us make man (humans) in our image, after our likeness.*" The Hebrew '*adam* means "man" and is a generic term for humankind. Later, '*adam* becomes the proper name "Adam." The creation process of humans seems to be different from the rest of life and thus there is some distinctiveness about humans. God makes humans, both males and females, in the image and likeness of God.

What does image and likeness mean? Over the centuries, there have been many interpretations. Traditionally, the image of God was seen as the various capacities that differentiate humans from animals such as reason, morality, language, creativity, etc. More recently, scholars point to the practice in the ancient Near East where a king who ruled over a large area would place an image of himself in the distant dominions. Such an image, and image bearer, would function as a representative of the king in that region. In this context, humans are God's representatives on Earth. To rule in God's stead. We have been given dominion over all the Earth.

"Dominion" (*radah*) is a word that many people often misunderstand. *Radah* is often used in connection with the correct rule of a master over a servant, officers over laborers, and kings over their people. It is the type of rule that emphasizes caring and results in the *shalom* of God (peace, universal flourishing). Dominion does not mean domination. The dominion that God delegates to us means we are to rule over the Earth in the same way that God rules over us. We are to rule in the likeness of God, ruling over creation with wisdom and compassion. Such royal servanthood was demonstrated perfectly by Jesus.

When sin entered the world, it destroyed the relationships we had with God, with other humans, and with creation. Today, our relationship with the Earth is more like domination than the biblical idea of dominion. We exploit the Earth with disastrous consequences which often adversely impact the poor and vulnerable.

#### **Prayer**

Loving God, in your providence, creation yields its good fruits that all may enjoy its riches. We pray for our planet Earth, that we may dwell peacefully with nature, be good stewards of its resources, and share its abundance for the sake of human flourishing. We make this prayer in the name of Christ your Son, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God forever and ever. Amen.

[Prayer adapted from the *Book of Common Worship*, Westminster John Knox Press, 2018, p.109]

#### **Reflection/Action**

What is the difference between "dominion" and "domination"? Which word best describes your relationship with creation and the natural world? What practices and mindsets do you have that might be grounded in domination?

### *No Excuse*

*For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse.*

Romans 1:20 (ESV)

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This text is clear and to the point. The nature of God is revealed within His creation. As examples, the beauty of the final burst of color of the Fall leaves as they die followed by renewal in the Spring. The grace of the rainbow after the rain. The order in creation – from the macrocycles in the Cosmos to the molecular processes within a cell, the rising and setting of the Sun, and the predictability of the seasons. As we gaze upon creation, we are ultimately guided to the truth - there must be a Creator.

In our modern world we spend more time surrounded by humanity's creation – cities, buildings, cars, and technology. Our senses are bombarded all day long with humanmade stimuli. We are sheltered from the weather, we often do not know if it is day or night, or what season it is. Most of us do not experience the circle of life involved in our food production. When was the last time you gazed at the stars? When was the last time you had your hands in the dirt? Being divorced from our natural world and surrounded by the human one, many in the modern world place humanity at the center and worship only the self. In this worldview, the Earth is a resource to be exploited. Yet so many with humanist views feel the gaping hole within them.

This Scripture also indicates that since the intricacies of creation reveal there is a Creator, ignorance of God is impossible. We have no excuse for our actions against creation.

#### **Prayer**

Creator God, the evidence of your existence is all around us. You are the author of the world, and all your creation sings your glory. Forgive us for hiding from you and our responsibilities in the buildings and cities we make that are nothing more than fig leaves. We pray that we perceive you more and more in the nature we often take for granted or ignore entirely. Give us eyes to see and a heart to care, in Jesus' name. Amen.

#### **Reflection/Action**

When was the last time you spent extended time in the backcountry or even a park?

Organize "creation walks" within your church. These are walks designed to meditate on the gift of God's creation and enable a deeper communion with all of life. Such walks can involve prayer, meditation, and Scripture reading at various points along the route.

Conduct a worship service outside in an area of outstanding beauty.



## *The Intrinsic Value of Non-Human Life*

*And God made the beasts of the earth according to their kinds and the livestock according to their kinds, and everything that creeps on the ground according to its kind. And God saw that it was good. Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth."*

*... And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.*

*Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them. And on the seventh day God finished his work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all his work that he had done in creation.*

Genesis 1:25-26, 31, 2:1-3 (ESV)

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Some think that the ultimate purpose of creation was humanity and that the rest of creation exists to serve humanity. This thinking leads to a mindset that the world is ours to exploit and that all other created life has no intrinsic value. In this view, dominion is simply to dominate. The above Scripture reveals how humans were created on Day 6 along with other land animals. We did not even get our own day! Humans were created together with creation, not separate from it. God's creative work was deemed "good" before humans appear on the scene. All non-human creation praises God (Psalm 148). Some interpret the pinnacle of God's creative work to be the Sabbath, the rest of God. Enthroned in His temple (the Universe), He began His rule.

We must therefore understand that our role with creation is established by God and involves specific responsibilities – to care for creation as God does. After the Fall, the redemption of creation is now bound up with the redemption of humans. God delights in all His creation and all His creation glorifies Him. When we desecrate creation, we stifle God's glory.

### **Prayer**

Almighty God, maker of all living creatures. You called forth fish in the sea, birds in the air and animals on the land. O Lord, help us to recognize the sacredness of all your creatures as signs of your wondrous love. Let us see your creatures as you see them, in the name of Jesus. Amen.

### **Reflection/Action**

How ethical are your food choices? Do your research. You may be surprised.

Consider eating less meat – become a reducitarian. Have meat free days or meat only at the weekends.

Reduce your food waste.

For those who are able, consider raising your own chickens.

## *God's Covenant with Non-Human Life*

*Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, "Behold, I establish my covenant with you and your offspring after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the livestock, and every beast of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark; it is for every beast of the earth.*

Genesis 9:8-10 (ESV)

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The account of Noah's flood (Genesis 6:9-8:19) seems to be mostly relegated to children's Sunday school. If we look at this event through a fresh lens as an adult, it offers a powerful example of God's care of His creation. We naturally tend to look at this through the human lens and see God saving eight people. When we read the details, we see God insisted that Noah brought onto the ark seven pairs of clean animals and seven pairs each bird along with a pair of every unclean animal. God decided to rescue more of certain animals than humans. One argument put forward to explain why more of certain animals were saved is that clean animals would be offered as sacrifices (8:20) and eaten as food (9:3). Why the need to rescue unclean animals? God appears to be serious about biodiversity.

What is unmistakable, however, is the so-called Noachic Covenant is made between not just God and Noah and Noah's offspring but with every living creature. In this Scripture we read how God has covenanted with the animals. This is not just a one-off verse; such is found seven times in the Hebrew version of Genesis 9. The rainbow is for the animals too!

### **Prayer**

Our God, God of all people, God of heaven and earth, seas and rivers, God of sun and moon, of all the stars, God of high mountain and lowly valley, God over heaven, and in heaven, and under heaven. He has a dwelling in heaven and earth and sea and in all things that are in them. He inspires all things. He quickens all things. He is over all things. He supports all things. He makes the light of the sun to shine. He surrounds the moon and the stars. He has made wells in the arid earth, placed dry islands in the sea. He has a Son co-eternal with himself, and the Holy Spirit breathes in them; not separate are the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

[Adapted from Patrick c.389-461]

### **Reflection/Action**

How does the fact that God covenanted with non-human life change your understanding of creation care?

How can you use the events of Noah's flood beyond a children's sermon?

*For God So Loved the Cosmos...*

*For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.*

John 3:16 (ESV)

If we look a little deeper at this iconic verse, what “world” is being referred to? Is it the Earth and everything upon it or is it simply people (and perhaps only certain people)? The Greek word used here is *kosmos*. There are five meanings for *kosmos* when found in the New Testament:

1. The created universe (John 17:24)
2. The planet Earth (John 11:9) – a dwelling place for humans and when contrasted with heaven.
3. The total of humankind
4. The complete human experience of life on Earth (Matthew 16:26: “*For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world...*”)
5. The world order in rebellion against God (John 8:23; 12:25)

Most people associate *kosmos* here with people (#3). Of course, theologians differ on their understanding of just exactly which people – all people, only the elect? However, by focusing on *kosmos* as people, we tend to focus on individual salvation. All that matters for many is saving individual souls and this becomes the ultimate scorecard of the church.

What if we read *kosmos* in this verse as the planet Earth (#2) instead? “*For God so loved the Earth...*” Our focus lifts beyond the individual. While individual hearts are transformed through the Gospel, individuals transform churches, churches transform communities, communities transform the world. We know God already proclaimed His creation was “very good.” We know that His creation proclaims His glory. We know the Fall impacted creation which is groaning for redemption (Romans 8:18-25). We know the ultimate redemption of humans will involve the ultimate redemption of all creation. Before then, believers living transformed lives includes being stewards of creation. The Gospel can thus transform the whole of creation in the present.

**Prayer**

Thank you, Lord, for loving the world so dearly that you sent your only Son Jesus to pay the penalty for our brokenness through His perfect life and His sacrificial death. Thank you, Lord, that through Jesus you supplied the means to reconcile humans back to you, the means to reconcile humans with one another, and the means to reconcile humans back to the right relationship with creation. We thank you for such grace and mercy extended to whoever believes in Him. In the name of the One who came to proclaim good news to all creation, Jesus Christ. Amen.

**Reflection/Action**

Which definition of *kosmos* do you infer in this text? How does this shape your view of your mission in the world?

What metrics do you use to track your mission?

## *God Wants All Creatures to Thrive*

*And God said, "Let the waters swarm with swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the expanse of the heavens." So God created the great sea creatures and every living creature that moves, with which the waters swarm, according to their kinds, and every winged bird according to its kind. And God saw that it was good. And God blessed them, saying, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth."*

Genesis 1:20-22 (ESV)

We tend to think that God's blessing and mandate to "*be fruitful and multiply*" was specific to humans. The above scripture reveals how God also blessed non-humans and gave them a mandate to be fruitful and multiply. We see this same intention from God in Genesis 8:17 after the flood. God made provision for humans to eat and also made provision for the non-human creatures to eat:

*And God said, "Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit. You shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth and to every bird of the heavens and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food." And it was so.*  
(Genesis 1:29-30)

Humans have already multiplied and filled the Earth to the point of the human population is now placing much stress on virtually every ecosystem. The success of humans is limiting the ability of animals and plants to thrive. Our proper place in creation is one where we see ourselves as part of the ecosystem, not separate from it. Sadly, the gardeners are behaving like an invasive species. God blessed the sea creatures – surely, we can find sustainable methods of fishing and means to curb ocean pollution.

### **Prayer**

Creator God, we marvel at the beauty of the seas and oceans and how they reflect your glory and majesty. May we accept the consequences of our actions that harm these salt-water ecosystems. Give us the wisdom to act now to protect all the wildlife in the seas, from the mighty humpback whale to the tiniest zooplankton. Help us to make wise choices that address the warming of the waters, pollution, acidification, and over-fishing that is killing the reefs. Heal these waters O Lord, and comfort all those around the world that depend upon the oceans for their livelihoods. Help us to develop sustainable methods to harvest your bounty, in the name of Jesus. Amen.

### **Reflection/Action**

According to the International Union of Conservation of Nature (IUCN), 80% of all ocean debris is plastic. Marine species ingest or are entangled by plastic debris, which causes severe injuries and deaths. Plastic pollution threatens food safety and quality, human health, and contributes to climate change.<sup>1</sup>

What steps can you take to minimize consumption of single-use plastics?

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.iucn.org/resources/issues-briefs/marine-plastics>

*In the Beginning, God...**In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.*

Genesis 1:1 (ESV)

The opening verse of Scripture reminds us that everything was created by God. This fact has some inescapable implications. First, it means humans are part of creation and not separate from it. Second, our Earth and the rest of creation belong to God. In Scripture we read how God called humans apart to serve and preserve creation. We rebelled and there were dire consequences to humans and all the rest of creation. One day God will restore creation. Therefore, creation has a Creator, a design, an intention. History is heading somewhere.

The prevailing mindset in the West is radically different. The Universe began with a god called Big Bang who formed something out of nothing which eventually led to the formation of the Sun and the Earth. After even more time, life began on Earth because of a chance process. Over millions of years and a series of random events and selective pressures, human beings emerged. Humans are now able to transcend their biological limitations. Life has no meaning. We have no purpose other than whatever we can come up with on our own (and how is that working out?!). One day the Universe will end but not before we succumb to the Sun burning out or some major cosmic catastrophe (assuming we do not destroy our planet or ourselves first).

These are two completely different worldviews (excuse the pun). Biblical scholar N. T. Wright argues that every worldview will answer four basic questions: (1) Who are we? (2) Where are we? (3) What is wrong? and (4) What is the solution? Each of these two world views thus has radically different outcomes for sustainability and care of creation. Only one of these worldviews has hope.

The first verse of Genesis is perhaps a keystone verse for our time. It provides a lens through which to view the rest of Scripture, some of such perspective we have lost in the modern world. Without the perspective of *"In the beginning, God..."* we fill this vacuum with an atheist/humanist god – ourselves. The greatest pandemic in our culture today is the worship of the self. Much of the desecration of creation and the negative consequences for the world result from our selfish needs.

Today it is encouraging how so many people are becoming interested in environmental issues, sustainability, and eco-justice. Many of these are non-believers yet have a reverence for God's creation and the love of people around the world. This is the image of God at work, even in our fallen state. Unfortunately, those who do not know the metanarrative of the Bible do not realize that we are living in a Genesis 3 world, not the world of Genesis 1. In our broken world, broken humans are not able to fix what is wrong. All human-only efforts will end up the same way.

**Prayer**

God of the Universe, we glorify you as the Creator of all things. You spoke and the Universe came into existence. You are sovereign over history. You are our Alpha and Omega. You are our worldview. Amen.

**Reflection/Action**

Be honest: do you see the world through the lens of Scripture or Scripture through the lens of the world?

*From Dust to Dust...*

*...then the Lord God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature.*

Genesis 2:7 (ESV)

*By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return.*

Genesis 3:19 (ESV)

God formed *'adam* (Earth creature) out of the *'adamah* (Earth, ground, or arable soil).

Even though most of us live in a human-shaped environment divorced from the natural world and the direct realities of food production, Genesis 3:19 reminds us that our very bodies are made up of terrestrial dust. We are an integral part of creation and made of the same elements as the Earth and other living creatures. Our global food production system is totally dependent on a six-inch or so layer of this dust. No matter how sophisticated we become, we cannot escape the fact that we are literal “Earth creatures” and all that entails.

**Prayer**

Almighty God, we pray that we discern your will for us on this Earth and that we embrace the whole context of the story of Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Restoration in your revealed Word and what this means for our work in the world. O Lord, teach us to number our days so that we might gain a heart of wisdom as faithful stewards of your creation, through Christ your Son. Amen.

**Reflection/Action**

The Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) states:

“Loss of soil threatens to destabilize our food systems even today. Incredibly, one inch of topsoil can take several hundred years to develop, and scientists estimate that the United States is losing soil at a rate 10 times faster than nature’s ability to replenish it. Soil scientists believe that if current rates of soil degradation continue, all of the world’s topsoil could be gone within 60 years. Luckily, there are many time-tested techniques to help conserve our soil so that it may continue to serve the needs of generations to come.”<sup>2</sup>

Get involved with activist organizations.

Support local farms that practice no-till/minimal tillage.

Explore methods to minimize soil erosion and runoff at your church and home.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.nrdc.org/stories/soil-erosion-101>

## *Environmental Consequences of Sin*

*Hear the word of the Lord, O children of Israel, for the Lord has a controversy with the inhabitants of the land. There is no faithfulness or steadfast love, and no knowledge of God in the land; there is swearing, lying, murder, stealing, and committing adultery; they break all bounds, and bloodshed follows bloodshed. Therefore the land mourns, and all who dwell in it languish, and also the beasts of the field and the birds of the heavens, and even the fish of the sea are taken away.*

Hosea 4:1-3 (ESV)

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In Genesis 3:17 we learn how the land (*'adamah*) was cursed because of Adam (*'adam*). Original sin destroyed the relationship between God and humans, the relationship between humans and other humans, and the relationship between humans and creation. The above verse also demonstrates how our “normal” sins against God – such as swearing, lying, murder, stealing, and adultery and all manner of violence – all have environmental impacts. The whole land suffers as a result. In this Scripture, the land suffers or mourns. We see the same language in Jeremiah 12:4. In Leviticus 18:25-28, the land vomited out the original inhabitants of the promised land because they made the land unclean, and the same warning is given to the Israelites. In Romans 8:19-22 we read how all creation groans.

Our world is broken because of sin. We continue to break our world because we sin.

Since sin has environmental consequences, this explains why we appear to be in a losing battle against environmental catastrophe. As we seek to confront the pollution in the environment, we neglect the pollution in our own hearts. Ultimately, there is only one cure for sin. Eco-whatever without redemption is doomed to failure. The environmental crises influencing our world is an opportunity for the Gospel.

### **Prayer**

Merciful God, we confess that we have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done, and by what we have left undone. We have not loved you with our whole heart and mind and strength. We have not loved our neighbors as ourselves. We have ignored the cries of the Earth. In your mercy forgive what we have been, help us amend what we are, and direct what we shall be, so that we may delight in your will and walk in your ways, to the glory of your holy name, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

[Adapted from *Book of Common Worship: PC(USA)*, 1993, p.53.]

### **Reflection/Action**

How could reflecting on brokenness in creation assist you in your spiritual walk and *vice versa*?

How can you use care of creation to help proclaim and live out the Gospel in your community?

*Ecological Sin?*

*No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God's seed abides in him; and he cannot keep on sinning, because he has been born of God.*

1 John 3:9 (ESV)

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We have a God-ordained obligation to care for creation. If we do not care for creation, is such an omission a sin? Is deliberately destroying creation a sin of commission? After all, the Earth belongs to God (Psalm 24:1-2). Do we sin against our neighbor at the other side of the world when our actions destroy their ecology?

The idea of ecological sin is a current hot topic. One recently proposed definition of such ecological sin is “an action or omission against God, against others, the community and the environment. It is a sin against future generations and is manifested in the acts and habits of pollution and destruction of the harmony of the environment.”<sup>3</sup> When we think in terms of ecological sin, moral responsibility transfers to individuals rather than placing the blame on governments and organizations.

As the above Scripture from 1 John indicates, a Christian who is in Christ cannot make a practice of sinning. Therefore, a lifestyle of continuously and intentionally sinning against ecology is not possible for the Christian born of the Holy Spirit. In Revelation 11:18, we read of the judgment against environmental sin and how the destroyers of the earth will be destroyed.

A moral awakening is required to wean society from its addiction to excessive quantities of goods, comforts and services that come at the cost of despoiling the atmosphere, forests, and oceans, and exploiting the world's poor.

**Prayer**

Merciful God, we confess our blindness to your presence in creation and our disregard for the flora and fauna of this planet. Our hearts are often set on personal gain and material wealth, and our drive for more has caused great damage. Forgive us our sins against ecology and empower us to walk humbly with you and each another. Reconnect us with your creation and lead us to the community you envision for us as stewards of your creation, through Christ our Lord. Amen.

**Reflection/Action**

How does materialism and consumerism contribute to ecocide? What are some sins against ecology you may have committed, knowingly or unknowingly, by commission or omission?

Simplify and adopt a more minimalist lifestyle.

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<sup>3</sup> Final Document of the Synod on the Amazon, October 26, 2019, #82, <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/vatican-city/news/2020-02/final-document-synod-amazon.html>



## *The Land is a Spiritual Barometer*

*...if my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land.*

II Chronicles 7:14 (ESV)

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This is the only time the expression “*heal their land*” is used in Scripture. This verse is often used in the context of healing and restoring our nation rather than physical land. However, the context for this verse is Solomon’s prayer of dedication for the temple and the preceding verses involve God speaking to Solomon about drought, famine, and pestilence (vv.12-13):

*Then the Lord appeared to Solomon in the night and said to him: “I have heard your prayer and have chosen this place for myself as a house of sacrifice. When I shut up the heavens so that there is no rain, or command the locust to devour the land, or send pestilence among my people,*

Rejection of God’s commands and statutes result in judgment upon the physical land. If people repent (*humble themselves, pray, seek, and turn* is the language of repentance), God will heal the land.

The state of the land, the health of the Earth and all creation, is thus a spiritual barometer. The state of the Earth today is a cry for repentance. Care of creation and the need for repentance are inexorably linked.

### **Prayer**

Holy God, Creator and Lover of all Creation, we humble ourselves before you, aware of our need for you and believing in your awesome power. We confess to you that we have sinned against you and creation. We have failed in our care for the land and its creatures, we have been greedy, destructive, and wasteful of the resources you entrusted to us. We have polluted air and water, eroded the soil, deprived animals and birds of habitat, and left our neighbors around the world hungry and thirsty because of our greed. We repent in sorrow and distress. Forgive us, we pray, and have mercy on us. Give us grace to change our ways, to make amends, and to work together to glorify your name. We earnestly pray for the healing of our land, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

### **Reflection/Action**

How healthy is your prayer life?

How can you integrate care for creation into your worship life, your prayer life, and your life of reconciliation?

Consider starting prayer chains within your church and across your network for specific care of creation needs. You can start your own virtual prayer meeting on Zoom or a 24-7 virtual prayer room at 24-7 Prayer [<https://www.24-7prayer.com/prayerrooms>].

Sign up with other creation care prayer groups. As an example, *Pray and Fast for the Climate* is a UK-based organization with members across the US and Europe. This organization coordinates prayers and fasting on the first of each month for creation care concerns [<https://prayandfastfortheclimate.org.uk/>].

*In Him all Things Hold Together*

<sup>15</sup> He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. <sup>16</sup> For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. <sup>17</sup> And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. <sup>18</sup> And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. <sup>19</sup> For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, <sup>20</sup> and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.

<sup>21</sup> And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, <sup>22</sup> he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him, <sup>23</sup> if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister.

Colossians 1:15-23 (ESV)

Jesus connects everything. Jesus connects us to each other, to God, and to creation. Jesus brings the broken pieces of our world together again. Creation was not just six days of work and then left to its own devices. Christ was the agent of creation and Christ continues to play an active part in its ongoing health and stability. “*In him all things hold together*” (v.17). One inescapable conclusion from this Scripture is that care of creation outside of being in Christ is doomed to failure. Broken humans cannot care for a broken creation without the reconciling power of Christ. Without Christ we are left trying to put Humpty Dumpty back together again.

History is full of attempts by well-meaning people who sense the divine in the Earth and nature, and who have a deep love of people, and seek to solve specific social justice and eco justice issues in their time and place through their own efforts. If anything, this is a testimony to the image of God that is in each of us. However, Scripture reveals our brokenness. This explains why, even if some progress is made, such human efforts alone are either never sustained or simply result in other (sometimes greater) problems that must now be solved.

**Prayer**

Almighty God, Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer of the Universe, we pray that our hearts, minds, and wills are in alignment with yours and you guide each of us to participate as stewards of creation in ways that glorify you. In the name of the One who is the firstborn over all creation and who holds all things together. Amen.

**Reflection/Action**

What role should the Gospel play in the care of creation?

Consider supporting eco-justice ministries grounded in the Gospel and working in Jesus’ name.

Romans 8:9 reminds us that our efforts and our lives are not our own: “*You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him.*” It is not so much about all that we do but about all He has done for us.

*Nothing is Wasted*

*Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass, and taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven and said a blessing. Then he broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And they all ate and were satisfied. And they took up twelve baskets full of the broken pieces left over.*

Matthew 14:19-20 (ESV)

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This Scripture comes from Matthew's account of the feeding of the five thousand (14:3-21). If Jesus can produce bread in abundance at will, why collect the scraps of bread in the first place? Perhaps this gives us some insight into Kingdom economics: God provides enough, people share, nothing is wasted, all are satisfied. How different this is from human economics: The Earth is exploited, people hoard, the waste is appalling, only a privileged few are satisfied while others starve. The irony is that those who have excess often live unhealthy and unfulfilled lives chasing possessions and worldly status as a surrogate for meaning and purpose.

**Prayer**

Almighty God, we long for a fairer world, the end of injustice and inequality. We ache for your Kingdom to come. Guide us in our daily consumption choices so that your abundant bounty is shared justly among all your people rather than the few seeking gain at the expense of the many. We pray the hungry are fed; the naked are clothed; the homeless are sheltered; and those who are denied freedom are liberated; in Christ's name. Amen.

**Reflection/Action**

What are some of the things you can do to participate in the Kingdom economy and become less attached to the consumption economy?

What food insecurity problems exist in your specific community? If you are not already involved in food rescue, what opportunities exist in your church to redistribute rescued and donated food?

Buy ugly fruits and vegetables!

### *The Sabbath Year*

*The LORD spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai, saying, "Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, When you come into the land that I give you, the land shall keep a Sabbath to the Lord. For six years you shall sow your field, and for six years you shall prune your vineyard and gather in its fruits, but in the seventh year there shall be a Sabbath of solemn rest for the land, a Sabbath to the Lord. You shall not sow your field or prune your vineyard. You shall not reap what grows of itself in your harvest, or gather the grapes of your undressed vine. It shall be a year of solemn rest for the land.*

Leviticus 25:3-5 (ESV)

The ordinances in this Scripture extend the principle of the seven-day Sabbath rest (Leviticus 23:3). Every seven years there was a year-long solemn rest period for the land. The conservation of resources prescribed during this period form the basis of good agricultural practice and ecological stewardship. The origin of this ordinance is God, the Architect and Creator, and thus the one who knows how to best care for creation. The idea of a Sabbath year contrasts with modern human methods of cultivation. In the developed world, the prevailing mindset is creation exists as a resource to be maximized. This mindset often leads to non-sustainable practices which ultimately lead to land degradation, soil erosion, and loss of fertility. Inappropriate agricultural practices are a major cause of desertification and the loss of entire ecosystems. Failing to adopt agricultural practices that align with biblical principles ultimately results in a myriad of human suffering. Such practices also dishonor the glory of God woven throughout creation.

#### **Prayer**

God of abundance, we celebrate the bounty of your Earth. We delight in the systems and structures that exist, allowing us to experience lives blessed with food security. We recognize this abundance may be unsustainable. Help us to improve the various agricultural and distribution systems to share the manna you provide across our world more equitably and help us to find ways to promote more sustainable agriculture across the globe that brings honor to you. Amen.

#### **Reflection/Action**

In what ways do modern agricultural methods fail to reflect biblical stewardship principles?

Grow your own or buy local. Use farmer's markets. Get to know your farmers. Encourage participation in Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) food systems. Tired of paying for lawn service at the church? Dig it up! Plan a community garden for next year as an outreach/education program. Support Christian relief organizations that are committed to sustainable agriculture.

## *Living Water*

*And God said, "Let there be an expanse in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters." And God made the expanse and separated the waters that were under the expanse from the waters that were above the expanse. And it was so. And God called the expanse Heaven. And there was evening and there was morning, the second day. And God said, "Let the waters under the heavens be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear." And it was so. God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was good.*

Genesis 1:6-10 (ESV)

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The unnamed woman at the well in John 4 who had to come out in the midday heat of the Middle East to draw water was captivated by Jesus' reference to a living water – a water which if drunk, one would never be thirsty again. She initially missed the symbolism, perhaps because how much physical thirst played in the life of people in this time and place. When was the last time you were really, really thirsty? For most people in developed world, the answer to this question is usually after exercise or after eating salty food. We think of drinking water as H<sub>2</sub>O – a chemical that is divorced from its natural setting. Water runs in pipes and is available at the turn of a tap or at the twist of a cap. We expect our water to be clean and pure. In the developed world most people never give a second thought to the quality of water drawn from a faucet.

During a recent long backpacking trip in a wilderness area, I had to filter my water from creeks and rivers – living ecosystems. Some of the creeks ended up being dry or with only a weak flow of questionable water. After long days of carrying a heavy backpack up and down mountains and building up quite a thirst, I developed an entirely different relationship to water. Since I carried dehydrated food, water was no longer was a commodity or resource, but it represented life itself. During the times when I came close to running out of water altogether, finding a reliable source of water became the focus of every thought and prayer.

God made our world with an abundance of water, yet our modern farming practices are drying up our aquifers and we pump our water sources full of pollutants. According to a 2019 WHO report, billions of people (one-in-three) around the world still do not have access to safe drinking water.<sup>4</sup>

### **Prayer**

Loving God, we ask for your blessings on all those who are thirsty. Purify, protect, and multiply their water sources. Help us never to take the gift of clean water for granted and let us work to clean, protect, and preserve our water sources for all people. Let us always be able to give a stranger a cup of cold water, even if they live on the other side of the world. In the name of He who is the Living Water. Amen.

### **Reflection/Action**

Where does your drinking water come from? Get involved with caring for your local rivers and lakes. Information on your own local bodies of water including drinking water quality and any ecological concerns can be found at *How's My Waterway* (<https://mywaterway.epa.gov/>). If you are still using bottled water, consider using refillable alternatives to avoid tons of plastic waste. Get involved in the UN's World Water Day (March 22<sup>nd</sup> each year).

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.who.int/news/item/18-06-2019-1-in-3-people-globally-do-not-have-access-to-safe-drinking-water-unicef-who>

## Old-Growth Forests

*And God said, "Let the earth sprout vegetation, plants yielding seed, and fruit trees bearing fruit in which is their seed, each according to its kind, on the earth." And it was so. The earth brought forth vegetation, plants yielding seed according to their own kinds, and trees bearing fruit in which is their seed, each according to its kind. And God saw that it was good.*

Genesis 1:11-12 (ESV)

Our forests have changed significantly since creation. After the global flood, further cataclysmic local flooding in some areas, ice ages, etc., the forests we have today look nothing like the forests that existed in the beginning. Today's forests exist because the original trees were created with the ability to adapt. The goodness that God saw in the beginning is no doubt still present in the forests of our day. Today, most of our forests bear the mark of human influence more than the influence of natural processes. As an example, in North America, mature, old-growth forests were the predominant land cover. After only a few hundred years of commercial exploitation, most of the original forests have been cleared. Most of the forests that exist today are replanted with limited variety of trees, heavily managed, and periodically harvested. Such forests cannot reach a steady state of maturity. Today, old growth forests only exist in a few protected areas or as isolated remnants in awkward places not economically viable to harvest.

Why are old-growth forests important? When left alone for long enough, the natural processes produce a forest that looks considerably different than the forests most of us are familiar with. Old-growth forests have fewer but older, taller trees. The structure of such mature trees supports more biodiversity than typically found in younger, replanted forests. As trees naturally die and eventually fall, this too adds to structural diversity which creates more ecosystems adding to the overall biodiversity of such forests. Old growth forests also absorb more carbon dioxide than their managed counterparts. Preservation of our biodiversity and reduction of carbon dioxide are two major environmental issues of our time.

There is an overwhelming body of research that demonstrates the health benefits of spending time in forests. The practice that began in Japan of "forest bathing" is taking off in the West. Just one of the benefits of forest bathing is the effect of inhaling phytoncides (wood essential oils) on prolonged improvement of the immune system. While spending quality time and focusing on being fully present in any forest is a good practice, old-growth forests have richer varieties of phytoncides than commercial forests.

### Prayer

Creator God, it is you who called the first seedlings out of the Earth and formed the first forests. Inspire in us a love and humility for the forests. We pray that we would be good and wise stewards of your creation rather than managers of a resource to be exploited. We pray this in Christ's name. Amen.

### Reflection/Action

When was the last time you took a slow walk in a forest seeking time alone with God? What aspects of your lifestyle contribute directly and indirectly to the destruction of forests? What changes can you make?

Get involved! Protect your local old-growth forests [<https://www.oldgrowthforest.net/network-forests>].

Learn about the practice of Forest Bathing. Consider using a Christian Forest Bathing Guide.

## *The Idolatry of Consumerism and Materialism*

*Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.*

Matthew 6:19-21 (ESV)

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Consumption and materialism are ingrained in our culture. The quest for possessions can quickly become a meaningless pursuit where our life is measured by the metric of what we own. We are taught to covet for what we do not own, and this leads to working until burnout. Our materialistic drives are also leading to societal destabilization as less privileged groups of consumers seek a bigger piece of the material pie as one aspect of social justice. The Earth is being plundered to produce cheap trinkets and toys that bring only momentary happiness before filling up our trash heaps leaving our deepest needs unfulfilled. Most importantly, our consumeristic and materialistic behaviors reveal more about what we believe than what we confess with our mouths.

Adopting a lifestyle that intentionally seeks the simple, seeks to minimize possessions, and refuses to submit to consumeristic desires is tremendously liberating. We are free to be in the world and not a prisoner of our own inner desires. We are free to worship our Creator and experience abundant life - not abundance of possessions.

### **Prayer**

God of abundance, please help us to be wise consumers. Help us to resist the temptations of spending more, using more, acquiring more, and wasting more. Break the bondage of conspicuous consumption within our nation. Help us to be better stewards of the materials and resources with which we are blessed. Let us use what we have in a way that can be a blessing to others. Transform our minds to be more disciplined in our lifestyles. Let us tread lightly on the Earth. Teach us to be content with what we have rather than always wanting more. Amen.

### **Reflection/Action**

Where is the materialism in your life? How much of your time, energy, resources, and focus are taken up by maintaining possessions you hardly ever use or need?

If you live in a home with a lawn, consider sharing your lawn maintenance equipment with your direct neighbors. In neighborhoods with lawns, why does every home have to own a lawnmower?

## Contentment

*But godliness with contentment is great gain, for we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world. But if we have food and clothing, with these we will be content.*

1 Timothy 6:6-8 (ESV)

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What does one need to be content? Our culture convinces us we need just a little more than we have. This worldview means we will never be content! This worldview leads to unsustainable lifestyles and ecological catastrophes. The above Scripture shows us how contentment is achieved through striving for godliness, not material gain and focusing on the eternal, not the temporal. We came into this world with nothing, and we leave this world with nothing – why complicate what lies in between?!

For me, backpacking is a useful metaphor for life. I take things with me which I think are essential for my journey. When I first step out onto the trail, the weight of my backpack is burdensome. During the first few days that I go through my gear and end up pulling out some items and leaving them in hiker boxes or shelters. Items that appeared to be indispensable at home are now viewed differently. The utility-weight ratio reclassifies them as burdens! The best thing to do with a burden is to get rid of it. As the days and miles progress, I find the optimal balance. My pack becomes lighter, and it is often the simple things that I rely on the most. A plastic spoon with a cut down handle is lighter and more useful than an expensive titanium “Spork” with a broken prong. The equipment soon becomes less and less important and being present in the journey becomes the focus.

### Prayer

Lord, you are our shepherd, and we should not want. Sometimes we do want because we forget the many spiritual blessings you give to us. Protect us from coveting the things of this world and the many environmental problems this behavior creates. Train us, O Lord, to seek life satisfaction through joy and contentment in Christ instead of the idolatry that lies beneath our desires to consume and possess. Remind us Lord that we should not be anxious about anything and that you supply our daily needs. In His name we pray. Amen.

### Reflection/Action

Godfrey Davis, author of *Wellington and His Army* (1954), claimed an advantage over other biographers: “I found an old account ledger that showed how the Duke spent his money. It was a far better clue to what he thought was really important than the reading of his letters or speeches.” How do you spend your money? What would your biographer conclude?

Simplify and declutter for 30 days. On day 1 give, sell, or recycle one item. On day 2, do the same with two items; day 3, three items... Continue for 30 days and welcome to a decluttered home!



## Roots

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God... And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.*

John 1:1, 14 (ESV)

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These verses from the Prologue of John's Gospel remind us that the second member of the Trinity added human nature to His divine nature and thus became fully human and fully God. Christ, who was present since before creation, became flesh and blood and invaded human history for a season. Through His incarnation, Christ called a time and a place home. He became connected to a particular area. If Christ had carried an iPhone and we could look at His Google Maps Timeline for His ministry years, it would not look all that impressive by today's standards. He did not travel very far on the world's stage, but the small area of His ministry was all He needed to start a fire that radiated out from Jerusalem, throughout Judea, Samaria, and ultimately to the ends of the Earth.

While we are not of this world and should consider ourselves to be sojourners, we are, through God's sovereign will, placed in a particular time and place at this very moment. Like Christ, our ministry cannot be divorced from a sense of place. Unless called elsewhere, we must bloom where we are planted. It is this place, for better or worse, that we are called be the hands and feet of Christ. It is this place that we must also demonstrate our care for creation.

### Prayer

Almighty God, we thank you for our time and place. While we cannot know every aspect of your will, we recognize that by your sovereign grace and mercy we are living where we are right now for a reason, and it is in this place that we are called to the ministry of reconciliation. Help us O Lord to discern your call on our lives for this season, especially involving how to best care for your creation. We pray that our efforts will bring glory to you and honor the people that lived on these lands before us, in Jesus' name. Amen.

### Reflection/Action

How well do you know the land in which you live? How committed are you to the place where you live at this season of your life? What are the most pressing creation care opportunities that you can influence? Who do you need to partner with? What other churches are involved?

What people groups were living in your area before you? How does this knowledge influence your approach to ministering to people?

Information on indigenous people groups previously inhabiting a specific area can be found at:  
<https://native-land.ca/>

## *Creation is Groaning*

*For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.*

Romans 8:18-25 (ESV)

Genesis 3 and the fall of humanity also had implications for creation: the ground became cursed. We are part of nature, which was made good, but the effect of sin cursed nature as well as humanity. In the same way, the ultimate redemption of humans will bring the redemption of creation. All of creation longs for the day of its liberation, just as we wait for the redemption of our bodies. At this time creation will be restored to its intended glory and a time of rejoicing will begin. Yet we do not want to just sit back and be spectators in this cosmic drama as creation groans around us – such as in the various natural disasters we experience with growing frequency and intensity.

In the present age, humans can at once with wise stewardship make the deserts bloom while through greed and over-exploitation can contribute to increasing desertification. God has chosen us to participate in the work of renewing the cosmos. Until the day of liberation, those redeemed in Christ must become attuned to the groaning of creation and exercise godly stewardship over the Earth as God intended. This means partnering with God in mending the brokenness of this Earth. This is but a glimpse of what is to come when God's people indeed live as children of God.

### **Prayer**

Almighty God, we experience creation groaning all around us expressed as floods, mudslides, droughts, famines, fires, hurricanes, tornadoes, earthquakes, eruptions, pestilence/pandemics, and climate change. We confess that it is sometimes easier to sit back and groan in unison with creation, seeking to find fault in others rather than look at the planks in our own eyes. We pray that we become stirred in our responsibilities as stewards but recognize that it is our own arrogance that leads us to believe we can do this on our own. Lord, we recognize you alone can bring this broken world to wholeness. Help us Lord to help the victims of the latest disasters and that through the help of our neighbors we can show them a glimpse of your love. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

### **Reflection/Action**

Relative to your personal impact on creation: Where have you made the desert bloom? Where have you increased desertification? What do you most lament?

Be attentive – Where and how is creation groaning in your local places?

How are you partnering with God in the renewal of His creation?

## *Hiking the Way*

*The Lord said to Abram, after Lot had separated from him, "Lift up your eyes and look from the place where you are, northward and southward and eastward and westward, for all the land that you see I will give to you and to your offspring forever. I will make your offspring as the dust of the earth, so that if one can count the dust of the earth, your offspring also can be counted. Arise, walk through the length and the breadth of the land, for I will give it to you."*

Genesis 13:14-17 (ESV)

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Called by God, Abram migrates from northern Mesopotamia to Canaan. After going down to Egypt to avoid a famine, Abram returns to Canaan. The command by God to Abram to walk the length and breadth of Canaan is interpreted by some as a symbolic form of legal or spiritual possession of the land. Another consequence, whether intended or not, is the intimate connection established with the land through such an action. Abram's travels in nature were foundational for his spiritual awareness and development. A similar theme emerges with the other patriarchs – Jacob had the dream of the ladder while alone in the wilderness while on his quest. Jesus also prepared for His ministry through the time He spent in the wilderness and continued to withdraw to wilderness areas to spend time alone with God. Even after His resurrection, walking and talking on the road to Emmaus has become synonymous with revelation.

Nature continues to be a place in which we form deep connection with the land and encounter God differently in our lives. According to the Celtic Christian tradition, there are two books of divine revelation: the book of Scripture and the book of nature. Creation itself is a sacred text through which the presence of God is revealed to us. However, for most people, there is a profound ecological gap between our modern lifestyles and the rest of human history. The problem is that most urban dwellers rarely get out in nature and most have never slept out alone in nature. Today connection to an area is now based on the historical, socio-cultural aspects of the place. Many people have lived for decades in the same place yet have done little more than observe the unique natural features of their home terrain through the window of an automobile. As humans, we tend to cherish and preserve what we know and value. If we do not encounter the natural world around us, why would we value it?

### **Prayer**

Thank you, God, for the rising sun. You have granted me another day. Your grace is amazing; bless you faithful Lord. The creation sings your praise, and I join the sound. Heal my tired soul; restore my aching bones. Lead each step along my path today. Ease my burdens as I press forward. Quench my thirst with your living streams. Like the cool morning breeze, your peace refreshes me. Steady me on the slippery slopes. Release me from the ropes that bind me, that hold me back. Protect me from the viper that hides. Lift me up from this shadowy valley. The peak is almost in sight. I am rising above this world. Into your country, I long to go. Bless my companions who travel with me. The trail is rugged and narrow, but you are right beside me. Thank you, God, my trusted Guide. Glory to your holy name. Amen.

*The Hiker's Prayer* by Scott Johnson [<https://sscottjohnson.wordpress.com/2013/09/05/the-hikers-prayer/>]

### **Reflection/Action**

Start a walking or hiking ministry in your church. Walking remains one of the few activities that costs virtually nothing!

## *Places of Solitude*

*And rising very early in the morning, while it was still dark, he [Jesus] departed and went out to a desolate place, and there he prayed. And Simon and those who were with him searched for him, and they found him and said to him, "Everyone is looking for you." And he said to them, "Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also, for that is why I came out."*

Mark 1:35-38 (ESV)

The previous day Jesus had taught in the synagogue at Capernaum on the Sabbath and then once the Sabbath was over at sundown, He healed many people that were brought to Him at Simon Peter's house in Capernaum. Mark claims "*the whole city*" was gathered outside the door of the house. Since Jesus never turns anyone away – one can imagine it was well into the night before Jesus was able to get some sleep.

Despite working well into the night, we read how the next day Jesus rose "*very early in the morning, while it was still dark*" to go to a desolate place to pray. The fact that none of the disciples could find Jesus suggested he had withdrawn a considerable distance from the house. Jesus used this time and place to commune with His Father. This experience seems to have clarified the focus of the next steps in His ministry since Jesus now announces His plans.

This was hardly an isolated event. A clear rhythm in Jesus' ministry emerges from the Gospel accounts. Jesus would passionately engage in His mission and ministry. He would then periodically withdraw to the wilderness for solitude and time alone with God in prayer. He would then reengage with his mission and ministry. Jesus taught His disciples to do the same.

The word used to describe the place where Jesus withdrew to is *erēmos* and means an uninhabited and uncultivated region. Such a place could be a wilderness or a desert. This illustrates how even the uninhabited and uncultivated places on the Earth have special importance. No part of creation is without purpose. Even such wilderness places need to be protected. One characteristic of wilderness defined in the *The Wilderness Act of 1964* is that such an area "*... has outstanding opportunities for solitude...*" [*The Wilderness Act of 1964*, Section 2(c)(2)].

### **Prayer**

Sovereign God, amidst our daily routines of rushing hither and thither, of deadlines, commuting, caregiving, schooling, exercising, ministering to others, and times of fellowship, we forget to take a step back from *doing* and seek out quiet and rest so we can focus on *being* in your presence. Lord, help us take regular time to retreat to a solitary place amidst your creation, just as Jesus took time to withdraw from the crowds, and seek Sabbath rest in you. We pray that we make such activity a cherished discipline in our lives and that our time alone with you in your creation is a source of rest and renewal. We also pray that such experiences fill us with love for all that you have created, in the name of Christ. Amen.

### **Reflection/Action**

Where are your places of wilderness and solitude? Where is your daily place? Where do you go for an extended retreat?

*Esau - First Fast Food Casualty*

*Once when Jacob was cooking stew, Esau came in from the field, and he was exhausted. And Esau said to Jacob, "Let me eat some of that red stew, for I am exhausted!" (Therefore his name was called Edom.) Jacob said, "Sell me your birthright now." Esau said, "I am about to die; of what use is a birthright to me?" Jacob said, "Swear to me now." So he swore to him and sold his birthright to Jacob. Then Jacob gave Esau bread and lentil stew, and he ate and drank and rose and went his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright.*

Genesis 25:29-34 (ESV)

The Scripture illustrates how little Esau thought of his birthright (the rights due to him as the eldest son including honor and inheritance). Esau was the oldest son of Jacob. He was a wandering hunter while his younger brother Jacob was a shepherd. As the text illustrates, one day when Esau came in hungry after an unsuccessful hunt, he was willing to sell his birthright to his younger brother for a quick meal. Maybe Esau wanted to continue in his existing lifestyle free from all the responsibilities associated with his birthright, including the covenant with God being passed down through his lineage.

A case can be made for identifying Esau as the first example in Scripture of wasteful consumption. Esau threw away his birthright to continue to live his desired lifestyle. Esau was so focused on the present that he was willing to sell his birthright for lentil stew. The description of Esau's behavior is interesting: "... *he ate and drank and rose and went his way.*" This is a rushed meal in a culture that valued the opposite. Perhaps Esau was the first fast-food consumer which means Jacob was the first fast-food worker!

While there is much more to the Esau-Jacob story than this, the behavior of Esau challenges us to reflect on our own consumption behaviors. What birthright (or God-given responsibilities) are we exchanging for a life of modern convenience? To what extent are we pursuing life on our agenda rather than the purpose we have been called to? What are the environmental consequences of this lifestyle? When does convenience become an idol? What is the cost of our convenience to creation? Esau's story is also a good example of how multigenerational consequences can often result from seemingly insignificant actions in the present. In the case of Esau, the covenant blessing was passed down through Jacob and his descendants instead.

**Prayer**

Loving God, reveal to us all the idols in our lives. Help us root out these idols— from the desires we have in our hearts to the objects we misuse as we seek to glorify ourselves instead of you. Forgive us Lord for those occasions where we seek to follow our will and not yours. Forgive us Lord for how our desire for convenience has contributed to the exploitation of your creation and caused problems for our neighbors in other parts of the world. Help us to tread lightly in your creation and bring glory to you. In Jesus' name. Amen.

**Reflection/Action**

Where in your life are modern conveniences an asset to your walk as a disciple? Are there more sustainable alternatives?

Where in your life are modern conveniences a liability to your walk as a disciple? How do you systematically remove them from your life?

## *The Principle of Sustainability*

*“If you come across a bird's nest in any tree or on the ground, with young ones or eggs and the mother sitting on the young or on the eggs, you shall not take the mother with the young. You shall let the mother go, but the young you may take for yourself, that it may go well with you, and that you may live long.”*

Deuteronomy 22:6-7 (ESV)

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The above Scripture is found in a section covering various miscellaneous laws. To many, this may seem insignificant and hardly worth the need for a specific law. However, the instruction in the above Scripture is an example of the principles of sustainable creation use that permeates much of Scripture. Such instruction is given to protect and preserve the means of life and prevent the shortsightedness of thinking only of today. In this case, the farmer could take the eggs or chicks as a meal – the fruit of creation. The mother would be left to ensure she is able to reproduce. Such instruction provides for a wise and respectful use of the fruits of creation and is as much a principle as it is a specific law. How far have modern agricultural practices strayed from this principle? A focus on the present tends to lead to exploitative practices that are unsustainable.

The principle of sustainability also applies to church communities. When a church community focuses only on the present needs of the current members, the community slides into an eventual irreversible terminal decline. When a church community has a sustainable or even a multiplication mindset, the focus is different. Each person in a key role within the church community is challenged to develop several others to take over rather than occupying the role until they die and thus leaving a crisis gap. A sustainable mindset also leads to enthusiastic interactions with the broader community which attracts new members. The pandemic has shown how social isolation from a community is a good strategy to prevent growth of infections. It is also a good strategy to prevent church growth!

In some cases, churches are focused on sustainable practices relative to the building but lack a sustainable mindset for the future of the church congregation.

### **Prayer**

Lord Our God, grant us the grace to grow deeper in our respect of your creation. Help us to recognize the sacredness of all your creatures. Help us to turn from our selfish, short-term consumption of your bounty meant for all – including people not yet born. Lift our eyes so that we focus on the long-term implications of our actions. Give us the vision to see as responsible stewards. Let the principles of sustainability infuse our thinking about all aspects of our life and community. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

### **Reflection/Action**

Do you have a sustainable mindset? How is this reflected in the various aspects of your life?

To what extent is your church involved in sustainable behaviors relative to creation? To what extent is your church a sustainable community likely to exist into the future? Are both aspects of sustainability related?

Support local farms engaged in sustainable practices such as companion planting, use of cover crops, crop rotation, using fertility from animals, hydroponic production, season extension, and strip grazing.

## *Loving Your Neighbor in the Anthropocene Age*

*And behold, a lawyer stood up to put him to the test, saying, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" He said to him, "What is written in the Law? How do you read it?" And he answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself." And he said to him, "You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live." But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"*

Luke 10:25-29 (ESV)

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The lawyer in the above Scripture accurately summarized the law into what is often called the Great Commandment. Love God and love your neighbor. The lawyer then seeks clarification on the meaning of neighbor. Regardless of any intent behind the lawyer's question, it is a relevant question to every generation. In Jesus' day, the definition of neighbor would have meant a devout Jew. Jesus responded to the question by telling the Parable of the Good Samaritan (vv.30-37). In this parable, we do not know anything about the injured man. He was naked and thus it was impossible to tell his ethnicity and status. The way the parable is structured, the crowd presumes the priest and then the Levite had the obligation to have acted as the injured man's neighbor, but they failed to do so. The despised Samaritan was not considered the man's neighbor based on ethnicity and history, yet he chose to act as a neighbor.

The definition of neighbor comes under renewed scrutiny in the current Anthropocene Age where human activity is argued to have the greatest impact on climate and the environment than any natural process. Today we now must consider every other soul on the Earth our neighbor since our Earth practices can help or harm people at the other side of the world. It is often the poor who are most impacted by environmental degradation underscoring the link between economic justice and environmental justice.

There are also two more types of neighbors we must love. First, we have neighbors yet to be born – our great, great grandchildren. What sort of Earth will they inherit after we have finished our watch? What we bequeath to them is determined by our decisions today. Second, when we take our biblical mandate for care of creation seriously and see the care that God has Himself bestowed on His creatures, we realize we have non-human neighbors. While this may seem strange to some, the biblical mandate for caring for non-humans is found in Deuteronomy 22-26.

In the Anthropocene Age, the biblical mandate of loving your neighbor cannot be separated from the biblical mandate of caring for creation.

### **Prayer**

God of Creation, help us to be wise and faithful stewards of your creation. Help us to be good neighbors to those who share our world today, especially to those who are unjustly suffering the consequences of our pollution and consumption, and to those who will inherit our planet in generations to come. Help us to be reconciled to other living creatures, so that we know them as neighbors, in the name of Christ. Amen.

### **Reflection/Action**

Who is your neighbor?

*Who Owns the Land?*

*The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein, for he has founded it upon the seas and established it upon the rivers.*

Psalm 24:1-2 (ESV)

*Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine;*

Exodus 19:5 (ESV)

*Who has first given to me, that I should repay him? Whatever is under the whole heaven is mine.*

Job 41:11 (ESV)

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Our beliefs and assumptions about who owns the Earth can have a profound influence on land management philosophies, economics, eco-justice, and social justice. As an example, in the case of ancient Israel there was no question the Earth belonged to God. There were specific prescribed regulations ordained by God that influenced how the land was to be used and who could live on the land. For instance, the year of Jubilee (every 49 years) ensured families would not become alienated from the lands that were originally assigned to them by God. Land could not be sold, only the right to farm it could be leased until the next year of Jubilee. The lease price reflected the potential crop yields expected until to the next year of Jubilee. At the next year of Jubilee, the leases automatically ended. This system ensured the property rights remained in the hands of the tribe or family that was given the land in the first place. The land could not be taken away from them permanently. This system emphasized fair leasing without exploitation and yet still offered the opportunity for individuals to be rewarded for their enterprise.

The Sabbath year and the year of Jubilee regulations also prescribed respite for the land itself. Each Sabbath year (every seven years) the land would not be sown, or the vines pruned. Harvest from the land could still be gathered. In the year of Jubilee, the land could neither be sown or reaped. Such practices compensate for our human tendencies of short-term focus and thus encourage long-term sustainability. The above model contrasts greatly with the dominant economic models that exist in the world today. Although the landless are not always poor, the poor are always landless.

**Prayer**

Merciful God, the goodness of your creation, the abundance of your bounty, has been obscured and distorted by human greed and fear. We pray that you will give our leaders wisdom and courage to guide economies and land use in more creative directions that align with your desire for people to prosper and the earth to be cared for. In the name of Christ our savior who reconciles all things. Amen.

**Reflection/Action**

How does your faith shape the way you view land ownership and land use? How can you use your church's building and grounds more creatively to meet more community needs?



## *Care of Animals*

*Whoever is righteous has regard for the life of his beast, but the mercy of the wicked is cruel.*

Proverbs 12:10 (ESV)

Many traditions use today to celebrate the Feast of St. Francis of Assisi (born in Italy c. 1181-82) who they recognize as the patron saint of animals and ecology. The celebration is often accompanied by prayers for creation and a blessing of the animals. Francis expressed his devotion to God through his love for all of God's creatures. He looked after the poor and the sick, he praised God for all creation, he preached sermons to animals, and he insisted that all creatures are brothers and sisters under God. In 1209, Francis received permission from Pope Innocent III to form a new religious order known as the Franciscans.

Francis left behind few written documents. The following is his *Canticle of the Creatures/The Canticle of Brother Sun* and is a fitting way to conclude our journey through the Season of Creation for 2022:

### Prayer

Most High, all-powerful, good Lord,  
Yours are the praises, the glory, the honor, and all blessing. To You alone, Most High, do they belong, and no man is worthy to mention Your name. Praised be You, my Lord, with all your creatures, especially Sir Brother Sun, Who is the day and through whom You give us light. And he is beautiful and radiant with great splendor; and bears a likeness of You, Most High One. Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Moon and the stars, in heaven You formed them clear and precious and beautiful. Praised be You, my Lord, through Brother Wind, and through the air, cloudy and serene, and every kind of weather through which You give sustenance to Your creatures. Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Water, which is very useful and humble and precious and chaste. Praised be You, my Lord, through Brother Fire, through whom You light the night and he is beautiful and playful and robust and strong. Praised be You, my Lord, through our Sister Mother Earth, who sustains and governs us, and who produces varied fruits with colored flowers and herbs. Praised be You, my Lord, through those who give pardon for Your love and bear infirmity and tribulation. Blessed are those who endure in peace for by You, Most High, they shall be crowned. Praised be You, my Lord, through our Sister Bodily Death, from whom no living man can escape. Woe to those who die in mortal sin. Blessed are those whom death will find in Your most holy will, for the second death shall do them no harm. Praise and bless my Lord and give Him thanks and serve Him with great humility.

[Francis of Assisi, "The Canticle of Brother Sun," Regis J. Armstrong, OFM CAP and Ignatius C. Brady, OFM, trans., Francis and Clare: *The Complete Works* (New York: Paulist Press, 1982), 38-39.]

### A Blessing for Animals

Almighty and everlasting God, Creator of all things and giver of all life, let your blessing be upon all these animals. May our relationship with them mirror your love, and our care for them be an example of your bountiful mercy. Grant the animals health and peace. Strengthen us to love and care for them as we strive to imitate the love of Jesus Christ our Lord and your servant Francis. Amen.

[From the "Book of Common Worship" (2018), A Service for the Blessing of the Animals]

### Reflection/Action

Pray and reflect on your insights gained during this season. Ask God to help you prioritize your list of actions.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



David Lyons is a life-long hiker. He integrates his passion for Christ and his passion for hiking with his work as a leadership and organizational development facilitator and his ministry training to create unique experiences for spiritual growth, discipleship, leadership development, and team effectiveness.

David has graduate education in Organizational Leadership, Marketing, Adult Learning, Instructional Design, and Theology. David has a master's degree from Birmingham Theological Seminary and is a graduate of Dubuque University Theological Seminary's Congregational Leadership Program. Other relevant training and certifications include Board Certified Executive Coach, Wilderness First Responder & CPR, Volunteer Wilderness Ranger, and a Leave No Trace Master Educator.

David is a Commissioned Ruling Elder in the Presbytery of Sheppards & Lapsley, Presbyterian Church (USA).

To discuss local guided creation walks, forest bathing, micro-pilgrimages, short-term wilderness retreats, Leave No Trace training, team building/effectiveness events, or speaking on adult wilderness ministry topics, contact David through his website [fieldpreacher.org](http://fieldpreacher.org).