

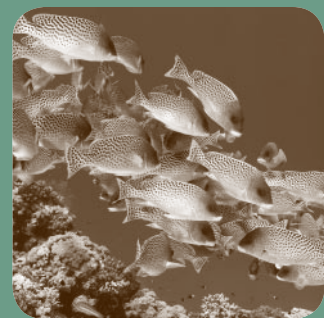


# Celebrating and Caring for God's Creation

## INTRODUCTION

**Going Green** It's the latest trend in everything from the food we eat to the places we live to the transportation we take to the products we use. With the recent explosion of media attention to the environment, one might think that protecting the Earth is a new idea. It's not. In fact, Creation care is at the core of our Christian tradition.

When we read the Bible, we often focus on the relationship between humans and God. Yet, the foundational stories of our faith reveal the importance of another set of relationships—the relationships between God and Creation and between humans and Creation. From the ancient Israelites to the early followers of Christ, caring for the Earth was an important means of offering thanks and praise to God.



## OBSERVING CREATION, KNOWING GOD

To understand the deep importance of Creation care in the Christian tradition, consider the Ancient Israelites. These ancestors of our faith lived amid cultures that worshipped many different gods who were thought to control all aspects of nature, from fertility of the land to ferocity of the seas. Communities celebrated local gods that tended to their own particular climate systems and conditions. As they journeyed throughout the Ancient Near East, the Ancient Israelites encountered a variety of climates, communities, and religions. In observing connections between different ecosystems, they began to recognize that the natural world was controlled not by many competing gods, but by one God who could be revealed through the unity of nature. The advent of monotheism emerged, in part, through observations of the natural world.<sup>1</sup>

Along with their insights about God, the Ancient Israelites observed the ways in which interdependent systems work well when they are cared for and fail when they are damaged or neglected. In response to their understanding of God and the natural world, they created an ethos for living in healthy relationship with God, the Earth, and one another. People of the church today often refer to this ethos as “stewardship.”



<sup>1</sup> Daniel Hillel, *The Natural History of the Bible: An Environmental Exploration of Hebrew Scriptures* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 35.

The Lord God placed the human in the garden of Eden to till and keep it. Gen 2:15

## STEWARDSHIP

### The First Job Description

The deep relationship among God, humans, and the Earth is embedded in the Bible from the start, framing our understanding of who we are as people of God. The two Creation stories of Genesis reveal a clear job description for humans: grow families and communities, care for the Earth as a just ruler would care for his kingdom, and till and keep the land (Gen 1:27-31; 2:15).

This first job description framed the ancient Israelites' understanding of the relationship between the land, their God, and themselves. The land belongs to

God and God alone. For the Israelites, the land represented the promise of God's favor, something that could be used, but not owned. As a people with experiences of both possession and dispossession of land, they understood that land should be managed as a gift from God, rather than as human-owned property. God tells the Israelites: "No land may be permanently bought or sold. It all belongs to me—it isn't your land, and you only live there for a little while" (Lev 25:23). Unlike kings in surrounding regions, the king of Israel was expected to "manage the land as a gift entrusted to him but never possessed by him."<sup>2</sup> Humility and justice were to characterize human dominion, and the land was to be held and worked for the good of the community and the Creation. They could secure abundance and peace by following God's rules for Creation: "Faithfully obey my laws, and I will send rain to make

your crops grow... your harvest of grain and grapes will be so abundant that you won't know what to do with it all. You will eat and be satisfied, and you will live in safety" (Lev 26:3-5).

#### WHAT IS STEWARDSHIP?

In ancient times, a *steward* was a servant who managed the resources of a household. Stewardship today means wisely managing the bounty of God's Earth household. Modern English reflects this ancient Greek understanding of stewardship:

Greek	English	Meaning
Oikos	Eco-	Household
Nomos	-nomy	Rule
Logos	-logy	Reasoning

The word *ecology* at its root refers to the *reasoning or logic of the household*—the Earth household. *Economy* refers to the *rule of the household*.

Today, we are the stewards of God's Earth household. The Christian tradition teaches that the land belongs to God, and we are called to care for it. To do so, our economies must reflect our understanding of the rules of nature revealed through our knowledge of ecology. Healthy stewardship integrates knowledge of the natural world with economic and social systems that ensure the long-term sustainability of the whole of Creation, including the people within it.



## JESUS AND NATURE

Jesus' life and ministry expressed the fullness of God within the created world. Born in a stable and cradled in a manger, God became physically present with both humans and creatures. At the start of his ministry, Jesus immersed himself in the waters of baptism, symbolizing God's immersion in the human experience, and sanctifying his ministry on Earth (Matt 3:13-17). Then, he traveled into the wilderness and up to a mountaintop, where he conquered temptation (Matt

<sup>2</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith, Overtures to Biblical Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2002), 70.

‘One’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.’ Luke 12:13

4:1-11). Throughout his ministry, he displayed both power over and reverence for the Creation. After expressing his humanity through baptism, he demonstrated his divinity as he quieted a chaotic storm and walked on water (Mar 4:35-41; Matt 14:22-33). He also turned water into wine (John 2:1-11), taking the water that is a reminder of God’s first covenant with the Creation, and turning it into wine that symbolizes the blood of the new covenant. Jesus said, “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, ‘Out of the believer’s heart shall flow the rivers of living water’” (John 7:37-38).

Jesus used examples from nature throughout his teachings to show how people should live in relationship to God, one another, and the bounty of the Earth. Birds serve as a model for trusting in God’s provision (Matt 6:25-26; Luke 12:6-7), and trees represent God’s realm (Matt 13:31-32). He contrasted the lives of animals to his own itinerant life: “Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man doesn’t have a place to call his own” (Luke 9:58).

Jesus also provided valuable guidance about sustainability and the use of the Earth’s bounty. Through stories like the Parable of the Rich Fool (Luke 12:13-21), he taught that security comes not through hoarding commodities, but rather through relying on and helping to share God’s provision for all of Creation. In his teachings on the coming of God’s realm, Jesus emphasized the importance of ensuring the bounty of the Earth are shared with the most vulnerable among us: the hungry, the thirsty, the sick, and all those in need (Matt 25:34-46). This includes making sure that the treasures of God’s Earth are available for future generations.

#### WHAT IS SUSTAINABILITY?

**Sustainability is a word that is often used in conversations about the environment, but what does it mean? A widely-used definition comes from a United Nations commission that worked on long-term strategies for addressing economic development with attention to environmental concerns:**

**Sustainability: Meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.<sup>3</sup>**

**The needs of the present include not only the basic needs of all people, but also the needs of the world’s complex ecosystems. These ecosystems provide for human survival in the most elemental ways: through clean air, water, food and shelter.**

**Yet, we are exploiting the world’s ecosystems faster than they can replenish themselves. Human-created environmental degradation is threatening and destroying human communities daily. Damaging the environment causes more people to be hungry, sick, and live in poverty.**

**The Millennium Ecosystem Assessment revealed that we are using most of the essential ecosystems for food production, water quality, disease management and climate regulation in unsustainable ways. This means that ecosystems are becoming less and less able to provide “environmental services”—the things we and all creatures require to survive: clean water, clean air, food sources that are resistant to disease, and stable conditions for growing food and building homes.<sup>4</sup> Those living in poverty are the most vulnerable to these damaging effects.**

**For more on poverty and sustainability, see the NCC Eco-Justice Resource, *The Poverty of Global Climate Change*, available at [www.nccecojustice.org/resources.html](http://www.nccecojustice.org/resources.html).**

Out of the believer’s heart shall flow the rivers of living water.

John 7:38

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.un.org/documents/ga/res/42/ares42-187.htm> accessed October 31, 2008.

<sup>4</sup> The Poverty-Environment Partnership, “Sustaining the Environment to Fight Poverty and Achieve the Millennium Development Goals: The Economic Case and Priorities for Action,” (New York: United Nations Development Programme, 2005).

# SERMON STARTERS

## GROUNDING IN SACRAMENT

Lectionary Texts for April 19, 2009: Acts 4:32-35; Psalm 133; 1 John 1:1-2:2; John 20:19-31

The gospel and epistle lessons in John and 1 John remind us of the human desire to see, touch, and experience the reality of God made manifest in the world. God entered into the human experience through the person of Jesus Christ. Like us, Jesus was baptized through water and received sustenance from the Earth. He took the water that is a reminder of God's first covenant with the Creation in Noah's story, and turning it into wine that symbolizes the blood of the new covenant.

The sacraments of baptism and communion use the Earthly elements of water, grain and grape as a means of communing with the Divine, sharing God's abundant physical and spiritual resources with all who seek them. The psalm reminds us, "How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!" These sacraments serve as a means of unifying the community of faith, grounding it both within the physical world and in a vision of God's realm of peace and justice. Through them, we become empowered to celebrate and share God's resources. The Acts passage describes a community where "there was not a needy person among them." It reflects the understanding that the Earth's resources do not belong to humans, but rather to God. When we pray, "Give us this day our daily bread," we recognize that the bread serves not only to sustain us, but also to empower us to serve others. As people of faith, we are commissioned to care for God's gifts in ways that ensure all have what they need, for both present and future generations.

For more on food and faith see the NCC Eco-Justice Resource, *Our Daily Bread: Harvesters of Hope and Gardeners of Eden*, available at [www.ncccojustice.org/resources.html](http://www.ncccojustice.org/resources.html).

## BELOVED, WE ARE GOD'S CHILDREN NOW

Lectionary Texts for April 26, 2009: Acts 3:12-19; Psalm 4; 1 John 3:1-7; Luke 24:36b-48

These texts express core mysteries of the Christian faith: How does God bring new life? How does God hear and respond to prayer? What will we become as children of God? How is the risen Christ made manifest in our world?

It is easy to take God's Creation for granted. Yet every breath we take, every sip we drink, every bite we eat, and every bit of light that illuminates our days are a witness to

God's life-giving, creative power. Too often we reject God's gifts in the quest for our own accumulation and power. As the memory of Jesus' trial and death are recalled in the Acts passage, we too must recall the ways in which we continue to destroy life. We are exploiting the world's ecosystems faster than they can be replenished. Human-created environmental degradation is threatening and destroying human and non-human communities daily. People suffering the effects of pollution, climate change, and loss of habitat cry out to God, asking as the psalmist asks, "O that we might see some good! Let the light of your face shine on us, O Lord!"

Romans 8:19 notes, "The Creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God... in hope that the Creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God." Yet this week's passage from 1 John states, "Beloved, we are God's children now." As we work to heal the Creation, all God's people shall obtain freedom from the bondage of environmental health hazards, the most extreme impacts of climate change and loss of diversity and beauty. In doing so, we follow in the footsteps of the disciples in Luke, witnessing to the glory of the risen Christ.

For more on human health and pollution see the NCC Eco-Justice Resource, *Mindful Living: Human Health, Pollution and Toxics*, available at [www.ncccojustice.org/resources.html](http://www.ncccojustice.org/resources.html).

## WORSHIP TIPS

- Ask congregants to bring photos of their favorite outdoor places and create a wall collage in your sanctuary.
- Invite young people to process into the sanctuary at the beginning of the service and place elements of Creation on the altar: a candle representing light, a clear bowl of water, a bowl of dirt, a plant, fruit, and photos of pets and people.
- If serving communion, decorate the altar with bags of grain and bunches of grapes.
- Hold a service outdoors. Invite participants to collect something that symbolizes a sense of God's presence in the Creation for them—a leaf, a stone, a feather, or something else. Ask them to share their experiences of feeling God's presence in the outdoors with those sitting near them.
- Pick a theme for your service, such as biodiversity, food, water, air, or something else. Be sure to look at the variety of resources available at [www.ncccojustice.org/resources.html](http://www.ncccojustice.org/resources.html).

## EVERYDAY STEWARDSHIP Individual Actions

- Use CFLs (Compact Fluorescent Light bulbs) to reduce energy use
- Bike or use public transportation to go to work once a week, and to go to church once a month
- Use water-saving devices in sinks, showers and toilets
- Use reusable shopping bags
- Unplug appliances when not in use
- Write, call or visit your elected officials to ask them to strengthen environmental laws
- Write call or visit your church leaders to ask them to strengthen environmental standards for the church

## Congregational Actions

- Carpool to Church for one month
- Hold a Local Foods Potluck, with primary ingredients coming from locations 150 miles or less from the church
- Use CFLs (Compact Fluorescent Light bulbs) and LED exit lights to reduce energy use
- Create recycling bins around the church for paper and other recyclable waste
- Conduct an energy audit of the church to find ways to reduce energy consumption
- Use shade-grown coffee and reusable mugs at coffee hour
- Plant a community garden on church property

**The National Council of Churches Eco-Justice Program office provides an opportunity for the national bodies of member Protestant and Orthodox denominations to work together to protect and restore God's Creation. For more information on the National Council of Churches Creation Care activities and ideas, visit [www.ncccjustice.org](http://www.ncccjustice.org) or contact [info@ncccjustice.org](mailto:info@ncccjustice.org).**

# We love God by loving the world. Sallie McFague

# Celebrating and Caring for God's Creation

**Earth Day Sunday** is a day to celebrate God's Creation. When God created the world, God blessed it and called it very good (Genesis 1:1-31). God is revealed through the beauty, power, abundance, and mystery of the natural world. Through wind and flame, water and wilderness, creatures and seasons, God is continually present and active in the world.

The Earth and all that is in it belongs to God (Psalm 24:1). As Christians, we are called to celebrate and care for Creation. Cultivating and caring for the land is central to God's first job description for humans (Genesis 2:15). Just as ancient stewards managed the household resources of their master, we must wisely manage the abundant resources of God's Earth household. Caring for Creation is a core value of the Christian tradition.

The many interconnected systems of the natural world allow life on Earth to flourish. The health of humanity hinges on the health of the Earth. Ecosystems are becoming less and less able to provide the things all creatures require to survive: clean water, clean air, food sources that are resistant to disease, and stable conditions for growing food and building homes. As we celebrate God's Creation, we must also commit ourselves to discovering new ways to incorporate Creation care into our homes, churches, and communities.



## CALL TO WORSHIP

*adapted from St. Francis' Canticle of Creatures*

**Leader 1:** We praise you God, for Brother Sun, who brings the day.  
Thank you for giving us light through him.

**All:** We praise you.

**Leader 2:** We praise you God, for Sister Moon and the Stars. In heaven you have formed them, bright, and precious, and beautiful.

**All:** We praise you.

**Leader 1:** We praise you God, for Brother Wind, and for Air, for Cloud, and Clear, and all the weather, by which you give your creatures nourishment.

**All:** We praise you.

**Leader 2:** We praise you God, for Sister Water. She is useful, and humble, and precious, and pure.

**All:** We praise you.

**Leader 1:** We praise you God for Brother Fire, by whom you light up the night. How handsome he is, how happy, how powerful and strong!

**All:** We praise you.

**Leader 2:** We praise you God, for our Sister, Mother Earth, who nourishes and governs us, and produces wonderful fruits, flowers and herbs.

**All:** With all the creatures of your Creation, we praise you!

## PRAYER OF CONFESSION

Loving Creator, we come to you in awe of the works of your hand. The roaring thunder and crashing seas remind us of our need for humility. Like Adam and Eve, in our desire to taste the good life, we overstep the boundaries you have placed on your Creation. We are sorry. Teach us to be humble, Lord. Focus our minds on your work: to till and keep the Creation, helping it to flourish and sustain life. Amen.

## ASSURANCE OF PARDON

God's rainbow set in the clouds is a sign of God's everlasting covenant with all of Creation. Blessed ones, as children of God, you are forgiven through Christ. Amen.

## SENDING FORTH

The whole Creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God. Go forth and be the children of God for this world: the tillers, the keepers, the peacemakers and the hope-bringers. Care for Creation as a humble response to God's love. Amen.

## STEWARDSHIP TODAY

### Great Green Congregations

Congregations around the country are responding to God's call to care for Creation.

- **Beach Lake UMC** in Beach Lake, PA, tills a community garden—for the good of neighbors near and far.
- **Kern Road Mennonite Church** in South Bend, IN, builds the tradition of biking to church.
- **Northaven UMC** in Dallas, TX, hosts an annual hybrid/fuel-efficient car show.
- **St. Mark Presbyterian Church** in Newport Beach, CA, has completely greened its building and operations.
- **All Peoples Church (ELCA)** of Milwaukee, WI, is reclaiming a garden and forming partnerships with local urban farming organizations to provide fresh food to all people.
- The 20s/30s group at the **Episcopal Church of St. Paul and St. James** in New Haven, CT, grows organic tomatoes and basil in pots in the church parking lot.

**To read stories about these and other Great Green Congregations, visit [www.nceccojustice.org/realstoriesgreatgreen.html](http://www.nceccojustice.org/realstoriesgreatgreen.html).**

## CREATION CARE: OUR SPIRITUAL LEGACY

An ethos of Creation care is firmly grounded within the Christian tradition. Meet some of the important historical and modern Christian voices for Creation care.

### Christ as Redeemer—Irenaeus

*“The initial step for a soul to come to knowledge of God is contemplation of nature.”*

Irenaeus (130–200 CE) taught that God’s original intention in creating the world was the final fulfillment of Creation through salvation. Despite human failing, the rest of Creation retains its goodness. Christ’s purpose is not only to redeem a fallen humanity, but also the whole Creation.

God uses the Creation creatively in order to reveal God’s presence and love.

### God Veiled in Nature—Gregory the Great

*“Full of wonder then are all the things which men never think to wonder at.”*

Christians working to convert Northern European pagans in late antiquity and the early Middle Ages came up against practices of worship and ritual that held images in nature as symbols pointing toward the divine. Some worked to systematically eliminate Earth-based symbols, replacing them with Christian symbols that emphasized God’s differentiation from the material world. Pope Gregory the Great (540–604 CE) thought it more effective to integrate relevant natural symbols into Christian practice. He felt that the natural world served as “a heavy, silken veil, whose rustling surface betrayed the hidden presence, behind it, of the countless saints of Gaul.”<sup>5</sup>

### Brother of Animals—St. Francis of Assisi

*“My brothers, birds, you should praise your Creator; he gave you feathers to clothe you, wings so that you can fly, and whatever else was necessary for you.”*

St. Francis of Assisi (1181–1226 CE) is considered the patron saint of animals and the environment. He preached God’s salvation for all of Creation and shared a spirit of charity with all creatures in need. For Francis, animals were brothers and sisters, each creature holding unique value and worthy of protection and advocacy. Anecdotes include his duet with a nightingale, his calming of a fierce wolf, and his concern for removing worms from the road to keep them from harm’s way. He saw himself as a Christ-like servant of nature.

### The Immediacy of God in Nature—Luther and Calvin

*“God writes the Gospel not in the Bible alone, but also on trees, and in the flowers and clouds and stars.”* Martin Luther

16th century reformers Martin Luther and John Calvin are best known for their concern with human salvation. Yet they both held the same materializing vision as thinkers like Irenaeus, describing the “new heavens and new Earth” as the consummation of the Creation.<sup>6</sup> They also spoke of the immediacy of God in nature. Luther said, “The power of God is present at all places, even in the tiniest tree leaf.” And Calvin claimed that all of Creation praises the Creator: “For the little singing birds sang of God, the animals acclaimed him, the elements feared and the mountains resounded with him, the river and springs threw glances toward him, the grasses and the flowers smiled.”<sup>7</sup>

### Hope for the Environment—Pope Benedict XVI

*“The family needs a home, a fit environment in which to develop its proper relationships. For the human family, this home is the Earth, the environment that God the Creator has given us to inhabit with creativity and responsibility.”*

Pope Benedict XVI, known to some as “The Green Pope,” is making global appeals for environmental protection. He notes crucial connections between responsibility for God’s Creation and for the larger human community, emphasizing the need to reduce large-scale conflicts over diminishing resources. Vatican City has become the world’s only sovereign state that is carbon-neutral. All greenhouse gases from the Holy See are offset through renewable energy and carbon credits. The city’s buildings are powered by solar panels. Trees have been donated to a Hungarian national park to nullify the remaining carbon emitted from Vatican City.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Peter Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity Ad 100–1000* (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 108–09.

<sup>6</sup> Tanya Marcovna Barnett, ed., *Greening Congregations Handbook: Stories, Ideas, and Resources for Cultivating Creation Awareness and Care in Your Congregation* (Seattle: Earth Ministry, 2002), 28.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.newsweek.com/id/132523> accessed November 7, 2008.

## CONGREGATIONAL ACTIVITIES *Activities are suited for people ages 8 and up.*

### Your Ecological Footprint

**Supplies:** Bible, Ecological Footprint Worksheet for each participant (available at [www.nccecojustice.org/eco/footprint](http://www.nccecojustice.org/eco/footprint)), pencil/pen for each participant.

Read Psalm 8. Share that an “Ecological Footprint” is a measure of a person’s consumption on the Earth. Invite them to complete the Ecological Footprint Worksheet.

Share the following: *Score of 12 or less:* You are a “Twinkle Toes” who has minimal impact. *Score of 24 or less:* You are an “Easy Rider” who treads lightly. *Score of 36 or less:* You are a “Bigfoot” and your footprint is damaging. *Score of 48 or less:* You are a “Godzilla” and your footprint is harming others. Let participants know we would need more than six planet Earths to sustain the footprint of the average American.<sup>9</sup> Invite participants to brainstorm different ways their families, churches, and communities can reduce their ecological footprint.

### Creation Care Spectrum

**Supplies:** index cards, butcher paper, magic markers, tape

Read Genesis 2:15. Share that we are called as a church to “till and keep the garden,” seeking out the many ways we can care for Creation. Invite participants to brainstorm ways that they can care for Creation at church and at home. Write each action step on an index card. Hang a piece of butcher paper on the wall. Draw a horizontal line and write “easy” at one end and “challenging” at the other. Ask participants to tape their Creation care ideas to the spectrum at the place where it best fits. Invite participants to write their names each next to one action to which they can commit for the next month. Challenge them to choose an action above the level at which they are already acting.

<sup>9</sup> [www.myfootprint.org](http://www.myfootprint.org) accessed October 31, 2008.

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