

## ***Walking with Nature, Walking with God***

This independent study is offered as a tool for exploring God's ongoing presence through the wonder and beauty of nature. You are encouraged to use this tool in whatever way makes sense for you: You can close your eyes and imagine the parts of nature that are the focus of each part of this study; You can immerse yourself in nature and open your senses to all that surrounds you; You can focus on images of nature; You can repeat the different parts of this study in different ways over different days. Whatever makes sense for you is your ideal for this study. The hope is that, however you journey through this study, it brings you a sense of God's loving presence in Creation. May you be blessed by this journey.

Consider ending your reflection time for each section with this prayer: *Creator of the fruitful earth, you made us stewards of all things. Give us grateful hearts for all your goodness, and steadfast wills to use your bounty well, that the whole human family, today and in generations to come, may with us give thanks for the riches of your creation. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ the Lord. Amen.* (BAS p. 396)

### **Part 1: The Wisdom of Trees**

A reading from Genesis (2:8-9)

*And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed. <sup>9</sup>Out of the ground the LORD God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.*

Reflection: Did you know that trees can live hundreds, even thousands of years? According to oldgrowth.ca, the oldest tree in Ontario is a cedar growing on the cliffs of Lion's Head that germinated in 688 ad. Wikipedia and other sources suggest there are Great Basin bristlecone pines in Nevada and California that may well be 5000 years old.

Consider the oldest tree you know and/or can see. To what has that tree borne witness over the years of its life? What wisdom does it hold? What can this tree tell us about our history, our world, what has changed, what remains possible?

What was the world like when this tree was a sapling? How much more life does this tree contain? What does it mean when that life is upended to make room or use for human desires? How do we continue to take from the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil today? How can we celebrate the wisdom, grace and beauty of these trees instead, walking more gently in the garden God continues to provide in our world?

### **Part 2: The Gifts of Trees**

A reading from Revelation (22:1-2)

*Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the*

*river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.*

Reflection: “Imagine if trees gave off Wi-Fi signals. We would be planting so many trees and we’d probably save the planet too. Too bad they only produce the oxygen we breathe.” To what extent have you thought about the gifts trees have to offer? When we celebrate the beauty of cherry trees in bloom, are we reminded of the sweetness of the cherries to come? As the songs of birds break through the morning, do we recognise how many trees offer birds space for shelter and home? Have we ever walked through a stand of trees and felt stress, anxiety and worry melt away as we breathe deeply the fresh air? When we hold a piece of paper, use furniture in our homes, or light a campfire, do we remember the tree that gave of itself to enable all of these things? How can we honour the gifts of trees?

### **Part 3: Plants and faith**

A reading from the Gospel of John (12:1-3)

*Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus’ feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.*

Reflection: It is suggested that the perfume described in this passage was created from a plant called spikenard that exists in different areas around the world. A version of this plant can be found in Ontario. It grows 90-150 cm (3 to 5 feet) in a season, produces fruit and dies back through the winter beginning the process all over again in the spring.

To what extent does this connection between a plant that exists in this area today and the Bible change how we might encounter this plant? If you could identify a spikenard on your walk, would you look at it differently knowing that a plant like it had been used to anoint Jesus some two millennia ago? What might it be like to grow this plant in your yard? Are there other plants that you know about which connect you to the stories of faith found in the Bible? What meaning do you make from these associations?

### **Part 4: The potential of seeds**

A reading from the Gospel of Matthew (13:31-32)

*Jesus put before them another parable: ‘The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.’*

Reflection: Most people are familiar with seeds of some form. We have watched or participated in activities in which we put a seed – like a bean seed or sunflower seed – into a cup and watch as the roots grow downward and stem reaches up spreading branches and, hopefully, flowering and providing fruit. The use of seeds as metaphor provides a hint at the

potential contained. We know that every seed holds possibility. We trust that some seeds will grow like the mustard seed and become a place of hope and safety.

To what extent do we see this same possibility within us? Can we envision Jesus as suggesting that we can be like the small mustard seed? How does this understanding transform the meaning we ascribe in the doxology as we say ‘Glory to God whose power working in us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine’?

### **Part 5: The challenges of planting**

A reading from the Gospel of Luke (8:5-8)

*‘A sower went out to sow his seed; and as he sowed, some fell on the path and was trampled on, and the birds of the air ate it up. Some fell on the rock; and as it grew up, it withered for lack of moisture. Some fell among thorns, and the thorns grew with it and choked it. Some fell into good soil, and when it grew, it produced a hundredfold.’ As he said this, he called out, ‘Let anyone with ears to hear listen!’*

Reflection: Have you ever had a plant die on you? Sometimes no matter how hard we may try, our efforts don’t bear fruit. We may overwater or underwater. We may not provide sufficient access to sunlight. We may have used soil that didn’t have the necessary nutrients. Based on these experiences, to what extent can we recognise that Jesus’ metaphor in this text remains meaningful in our context?

There are ways in which distractions, poor choices, and distortions can undermine the practices of our faith. Our efforts are far from perfect. There is much for which we can and, perhaps, should repent. Doing so can help to free us for those moments when we experience the grace and wonder of what happens when seed falls into good soil. What have these moments looked like for you? How have you celebrated this harvest?

### **Part 6: The birds of the air**

A reading from the Gospel of Matthew (6:25-26)

*‘Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?’*

Reflection: Did you know: that down from ducks and geese is still the most efficient insulation known, natural or synthetic? That, if you ate like a bird, you could end up eating the equivalent of twenty-five large pizzas each day? That, pitches in some birdsongs are related mathematically, like a musical scale?

Birds are fascinating and wonderful creatures. We often celebrate this by providing feeding stations that allow us to watch for our favourites more closely. Of course, creation has already provided everything birds need. Within the ranges of each, there are plants, insects, and more that have grown alongside each other over the course of generations to best adapt for the

needs of all. To what extent have human beings disrupted this balance? How can we better safeguard the integrity of God's Creation so that the birds of the air can continue to feast? In what ways could such care for the birds help us better understand the challenge to care for one another?

### **Part 7: In praise of Creation**

A reading from Psalm 8

*O LORD, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!*

*You have set your glory above the heavens. Out of the mouths of babes and infants you have founded a bulwark because of your foes, to silence the enemy and the avenger.*

*When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?*

*Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honour. You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet, all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the seas.*

*O LORD, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!*

Reflection: Some suggest this psalm was written by David as he recalled nights as a shepherd looking up at the vastness of the sky. How does it feel to gaze into the expanse of the universe? To what extent is this view humbling? Can we fathom the wonder and power of God who made all that we see and more? To what extent do we find it astounding that the God who made all of this, also saw fit to include us in this world? How do we thank God for Creation and for our lives?