

How Are We Related to God's Creation?



Session 1



Genesis 1:1–2:1; 2:7, 15, 18–20a; Psalm 8

Session Objective

Scripture tells us many things about our relationship to God's creation. From the very first chapter of the Bible, we learn that we are part of creation. In Genesis 2, God gives us a responsibility to care for the world. This session will help students consider their role within creation and their responsibility to it.

Faith Statement

After God had made all other creatures, God created humankind, male and female . . . endued them with living, reasonable, and immortal souls; made them after God's own image, in knowledge, righteousness and holiness, having the law of God written in their hearts, and power to fulfill it, with dominion over the creatures; yet subject to fall.

—*Westminster Larger Catechism*
(7.127)

Session Overview

 Enter	Option A: Letter Mingling
	Option B: Trail Mix Creation
	Option C: Puzzle Banner
 Engage	Option A: Resting with the Question
	Option B: All the Time or Not So Much
 Explore	Option A: Genesis 2
	Option B: Psalm 8
	Option C: Faith Statement
 Express	Option A: Silent Game
	Option B: Scarce Resources
 Exit	Conservation Pledge Sheets



Enhancements

Family Connections
Web Connections
Explore God's Creation
Mission Project



For instructions to download Web Resources and the coffeehouse version, see page 1.

Spiritual Reflection for Leaders

Choose one of the session's three Scripture passages and read it through carefully. Then read it through again, in calm silence, holding onto any words or phrases that stand out to you. Read it a third time, imagining yourself in the scene. Is God talking to you? Are you talking to someone? Are you observing some divine event? Let your presence in the scene inspire you as you reflect on the following questions:

- How are you related to natural creation? How should you be related?
- What changes would you have to make in your life in order to care better for the world?
- What is holding you back from these changes?
- How can you overcome these roadblocks?



Understanding the Scripture

This session centers on God's creation: our relationship to it, our role within it, and our responsibility for it. Genesis, along with the next four books of the Old Testament, is actually a compilation from a number of writers, or groups of writers. The two creation stories in the first chapters seem to be written by two of those groups. Scholars think that the first story, about seven days of creation, comes from the Priestly source (named so because much of the writing from that source, especially in Leviticus, is concerned with priestly matters) and that the second story, about Adam's rib, comes from the Jahwehist source (named so because much of the writing from that source uses the sacred name for God).

Both stories about creation almost certainly began in oral tradition hundreds of years before they were written and edited into their final forms. Scholars believe, however, that the Jahwehist version of creation was probably codified during the kingship of David or Solomon (1005–928 B.C.).¹ The Priestly version in chapter 1 seems to have been codified during or soon after the Jewish exile in Babylon (586–538 B.C.).²

The Priestly writers finished this version of Genesis 1–2:3 under stress of religious oppression, or perhaps under the equally stressful pressures of reaculturating Jerusalem and reestablishing the temple. It is likely that one of their goals was to express, in no uncertain terms, their faith and commitment to their sovereign Creator. Hence, their narrative presents us with the important truth of our solidarity with the world.

1. *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 10.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 142.

The Jahwehists context, on the other hand, was of relative comfort and national stability under the monarchy. It is possible that this allowed them to further consider the responsibilities implicit in creation. Hence, their narrative presents us with the important truth that humankind is called by God to care for creation.



Understanding the Faith Statement

This excerpt from the *Larger Catechism* affirms the biblical truth in the two creation stories and tells how the church has understood its place in those stories. Three topics from our session are addressed:

1. The catechismal passage tackles the tension between the unity of creation and the special quality with which God created humans.
2. It recognizes the essential connection between humanity's "dominion" and the law of God, thereby denying the common misrepresentation that God gave us free rein to dominate and to exploit nature.
3. The final phrase reminds us how easy and natural it is to fail in following God's commandments and justice and therefore how important it is to be reminded and to learn about ways in which we can repent and renew our focus.



Teaching Today's Question

Some young people may come to this session with preconceived notions about the first two chapters of Genesis. Hopefully, they will still be open to discuss interpretations, implications, and applications of the text. Even so, the creation narratives can be polarizing for youth in terms of the creation versus evolution debate.

One way to prepare for potential friction is to explain early in your time together the specific purpose for today's study. Assure the youth that they will be exploring what these stories say about *our relationship with creation*, not what they say about creation per se. Accordingly, be prepared to discuss the issue of humanity's unique role in creation. Obviously there is something special about us. And yet, whatever that "specialness" is—a discussion for another session—we are not separate from creation.

You might also hear questions about why God cannot take care of God's own creation. Be prepared to discuss with students how God uses us as tools of justice, in no exclusion to God's omnipotence.



Please reuse supplies whenever you can, and recycle everything you can!



Enter

Option A: Letter Mingling



Letters from a board game, letters written on scrap paper, or letters printed and cut apart using “Letters” (Web Resource 1a), music player, upbeat music

Before students arrive, prepare a set of letters in one of the following ways. Each group member needs one or two letters.

- Collect letters from a board game
- Cut scrap paper into 3" x 3" squares and write a different letter on each square.
- Print out one or more copies of “Letters” (Web Resource 1a) and cut the letters apart.

Greet students as they arrive and hand each person one or two of the prepared letters. Tell them that, when the music plays, they are to move around the room, exchanging letters. When the music stops, they should quickly work with other students to create a word by combining their letters. When a group has formed a word, have them hold up their letters. Play and stop the music a few times as the participants exchange letters and try to make new words.

If you are using “Letters” (Web Resource 1a), call out the following list of important words from today’s session and have the participants make the words with their letters:

creation, dominion, sustain, care, and earth.

Option B: Trail Mix Creation



Bible, six bowls, six spoons, granola, raisins, oats, chocolate pieces, peanuts, another snack item (such as small pretzels, another kind of nut, or another kind of dried fruit), small plastic bags (one for each youth)



Check with youth and parents about possible food allergies—especially when using nuts.

In this activity, your students will make trail mix composed of six elements, the whole of which will offer a tasty representation of the unity and interconnectedness of creation. Fill each bowl with a different trail mix element and place the bowls on a table in the middle of the room.

Give each participant a small plastic bag. Explain that you are going to read the creation story from the first chapter in Genesis while the participants create a bag of trail mix. Read each set of the following Bible verses, inviting the participants to add a spoonful or two of the suggested element after you read each section.

Genesis 1:1–5 (Add granola)

Genesis 1:6–8 (Add raisins)

Genesis 1:9–13 (Add oats)

Genesis 1:14–19 (Add chocolate pieces)

Genesis 1:20–23 (Add peanuts)

Genesis 1:24–2:1 (Add other ingredient)

Explore the following questions together:



- Would trail mix still be trail mix without the sixth element that you added? Would the sixth element in a bag alone be trail mix?
- In what ways is the sixth element special? In what ways is the sixth element part of the whole?
- How are humans special in creation? How are humans united with the rest of God's creation?

Invite a volunteer to reread Genesis 1:26–28, and say something like:



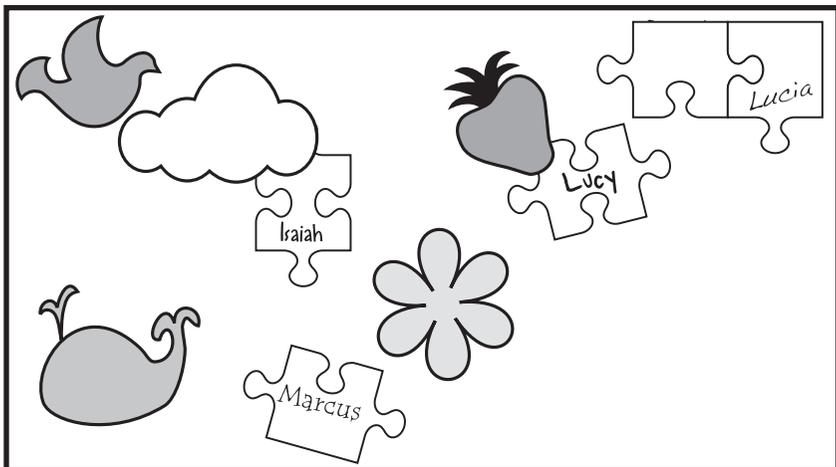
Human beings are a special part of God's creation, but God created one united world in solidarity together.

Option C: Puzzle Banner

- Poster board or butcher paper, markers, masking tape (Note: The poster board or butcher paper needs to be large enough for each participant to eventually draw five puzzle pieces on it.)

In this activity, your students will respond to the unity of God's creation by starting a puzzle banner that will, over four sessions, display their names as interconnected to many other parts of creation.

Tape a piece of poster board or butcher paper on a wall. Invite each participant to draw a puzzle piece on the poster board or butcher paper, in



whatever shape, color, or detail they want. At this point, the puzzle pieces do not need to be connected, but there does need to be adequate space left for each participant to add four more puzzle pieces. Ask each participant to write his or her name in the puzzle piece that he or she drew.

Next, invite each student to draw a puzzle-piece shape for some part of creation to which he or she feels connected. Encourage participants to think broadly (for instance, “dogs” rather than “Fido”) and to draw their part of creation in some way that resembles that aspect of creation (for instance, “sky” might be large, blue, and near the top of the puzzle banner).

Opening Prayer

Creating God, who made the world out of the empty darkness of chaos and created each of us in your image, be with us as we open up your Holy Scripture and find ways to explore your Word together. Help us to listen and share as we challenge each other to grow in faith and love in our time together. In Christ’s name we pray, amen.



Engage

Option A: Resting with the Question

Gather the participants in a comfortable location and use the following conversation starters to guide a conversation that explores the question “How are we related to God’s creation?” Encourage the students to ask their own questions that relate to this question during this time.

- In what ways are human beings related to God’s creation?
- As followers of Jesus Christ, what responsibility do we have (or not have) for the earth?
- How important or not important is it for us to take care of God’s creation? Should this be our highest priority as Christians? Are other things more important?

Option B: All the Time or Not So Much

Copy of “All the Time” (Web Resource 1b) and “Not So Much” (Web Resource 1c), tape

Hang the “All the Time” sign on one wall of the meeting space and hang the “Not So Much” sign on the opposite wall. Invite the participants to gather in the middle of the meeting space. Tell them that you are going to ask them a series of questions and they will respond to each question by moving to wherever they want between the extremes of “all the time” or “not so much.” Read each of the following questions, one at a time, and give the students plenty of time to respond. Take time to discuss the responses to each question.



- How often do you reduce your use of something to help the earth?
- How often do you reuse items in order to help the earth?
- How often do you recycle items in order to help the earth?
- How often do you approach reducing, reusing, and recycling as a spiritual matter?
- How often do you think or talk about needing to be a good caretaker of God's creation?
- As a person of faith, how much of your time and energy do you think needs to go toward taking care of God's creation?

Pray the opening prayer with the participants.



Explore

Option A: Genesis 2



Bibles, plastic water bottle for each student, permanent markers in different colors

In this learning activity, your students will consider the relationship between naming and responsibility. Remove the labels from the bottles and set out permanent markers. Give each participant a bottle and ask him or her to decorate it as if it were his or her favorite animal. Once all of the bottles have been decorated, ask each participant to name his or her animal and give each person an opportunity to introduce his or her animal to the rest of the group.

Make sure each participant has a Bible and invite a volunteer to read Genesis 2:7, 15, 18–20a out loud. Explore the following questions with the participants:



- Who named you?
- What have you named in your life?
- How would you feel if someone destroyed the animal that you just named?
- Why do you think God let humans name the animals in Genesis 2?
- In verse 7, God formed *man* (Hebrew = *adam*) from the dust of the ground (Hebrew = *adamah*). How does this word connection affect our understanding of the passage?
- What do verses 15 and 18–20a imply about your own relation to God's creation?

Option B: Psalm 8

- Bibles, paper and markers or supplies for finger painting

Make sure each student has a Bible and invite a volunteer to read Psalm 8 out loud to the group. Explore the following questions about our responsibility to God's creation:



- What does *dominion* (or *rule* in the NIV and CEV) mean in these passages? (*having responsibility for, being in charge of, caring for*)
- What is the difference between *dominion* and *domination*?
- What is a connection between *having dominion* (or *ruling*) and being "made in God's image"? (Look at this session's Faith Statement for a hint. *God made us able, and with the holy responsibility, to care for creation.*)

If you haven't already read Genesis 1:1—2:1 (in Enter, Option B) out loud together, have someone in the group read Genesis 1:1—2:1 out loud. Ask: Did you hear any words in the psalm that you also heard in the Genesis passage?

Give each participant a sheet of paper and markers or supplies for finger painting. Invite each person to create a picture of his or her concept of *land*. Try not to give any further instructions, so that the pictures reveal the participants' most direct concept.

Give each participant the opportunity to share and explain his or her picture to the rest of the group. Then explore the following questions:



- Who included soil? Plants? Animals? Water? Humans?
- How does land nurture and nourish life?
- How does your community treat land?
- What parts of land are in danger?³

Option C: Faith Statement

- Copy of "Faith Statement" (Web Resource 1d) for each student, pens

Give each student a copy of "Faith Statement" (Web Resource 1d) and explain that the statement is taken from the *Westminster Larger Catechism*, which is one of the confessions, or faith statements, from the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)'s *Book of Confessions*. Divide the group into pairs, give each pair a pen, and ask them to rewrite the faith statement in their own words in the blank space on the page. After a few minutes give each pair an opportunity to share their rewritten statement with the rest of the participants before exploring the following questions:



- What does this faith statement say about God?
- What does this faith statement say about humanity?
- What does this faith statement say about our relationship to God's creation?



Express

Option A: Silent Game



Bible, index cards, pens, prepared scoring sheet or copy of "Score Sheet" (Web Resource 1e), copy of "Scoring Instructions" (Web Resource 1f)

Give each participant five index cards. Create a scoring sheet with each of the participants' names and five scoring columns or print out "Score Sheet" (Web Resource 1e) and list each participant's name. Print out "Scoring Instructions" (Web Resource 1f) and post it in a visible location.

Explain the following instructions to the group:

- This is a silent game for points. (Do *not* specify that the goal for any one person is to gain the most points—that's a natural assumption, although wrong in this case.)
- Over five rounds, you will secretly choose to *care for* or *exploit* resources by writing either the phrase *care for* or the word *exploit*, along with your name, on an index card.
- For each round, if everyone chooses *care for*, each person receives two points. If one or two people choose *exploit*, the people who chose *exploit* will receive four points, and the rest of the class will receive only one point. If three or four people choose *exploit*, the people who chose *exploit* will receive three points, and the rest of the class will receive half of a point. If more than four people choose *exploit*, no one receives any points.
- After each round I will tally, record, and announce the points for that specific round. You must stay silent during each round, but you will have thirty seconds to strategize between rounds.

After you announce the final points, tell the participants that the real goal was for the whole group to score the most points together. Add up the total points achieved during the activity and divide the total by the number of people who participated. A good average score is 1½–2 points per person; a not-so-good average score is anything under 1½ points per person. Begin a short discussion about cooperation, resources, and responsibility using the following questions:



- What are three words that describe how you felt when you were doing this activity?
- How is this game like real life? (*There are only so many resources; some people are tempted to abuse resources for personal gain; abusing resources hurts us all.*)



- What resources do people exploit in real life? What resources do you exploit the most?
- What have the previous Bible verses said about our unity and interconnectedness with the world?

Option B: Scarce Resources



Powdered drink mix (a kind that requires you to add sugar), vinegar, sugar, three 2-quart pitchers, water, three mixing spoons, measuring cup, small drinking cup for each student, *optional*: "Group Instructions" (Web Resource 1g)

- Set a pitcher filled with water and a spoon on three separate tables and, if you choose, place one of the instruction sheets cut from "Group Instructions" (Web Resource 1g) facedown on each of the tables.
- In the water pitcher for Group 2's table, add about 4–6 ounces of vinegar. (Do not tell the participants that you have done this.)
- Set the powdered drink mix, sugar, measuring cup, and drinking cups on a table in the center of the meeting space.

Divide the participants into three groups and ask each group to gather around a different table. If you have a small class, make sure there is at least one person at each table. Tell the participants that each group is going to make enough of a beverage using the powdered drink mix so that every participant in the class can have a taste. Invite each group to look at their assigned instructions or quietly explain the following instructions to each group:

Group 1: Follow the powdered drink mix directions exactly.

Group 2: Follow the powdered drink mix directions exactly.

Group 3: Add the correct amount of powdered drink mix to the water, but do not add any sugar.

Ask each group to follow their instructions to make a batch of drink to share with the rest of the class. When all three batches are ready, give each person a drinking cup and ask each person to sample each of the batches. Then explore the following questions with the group:



- What was right or wrong about each of the batches?
- In simple terms, how were the resources for the first batch managed? (*Great; we used the right ingredients in the right proportions, and the result tasted good.*)
- Where is the world like the second batch? (*wherever there is pollution or waste*) What does that pollution and waste do to God's creation?



- Where is the world like the third batch? (*wherever resources are scarce*) How do scarce resources affect God's creation and creatures?
- Which batch represents the world that God wants us to bring into being?
- How do you add to the pollution of the world? How do you add to the scarcity of resources?

Conclude the discussion by saying something like:



Even small efforts help the world, so God appreciates everything that each of us is able to do!



Exit

Conservation Pledge Sheets



Copy of "Conservation Pledge Sheet" (Web Resource 1h) and pen for each participant

Give each participant a copy of "Conservation Pledge Sheet" (Web Resource 1h) and a pen. Invite participants to follow the instructions on the page. After a few minutes, gather the group in a circle and give each person an opportunity to share which activity he or she chose to do. Challenge the group members to make this activity a high priority in the next few days. Close with the closing prayer.

Closing Prayer

Holy God, be with us as we go from this place and help us to take what we've learned and experienced together with us as we go. In the days ahead, may we be your hands and feet in the world, searching for ways to take care of your creation and finding ways to connect with all that you have given us to protect. Amen.



Enhancements

Other Ways to Connect with the Session

Family Connections

"Family Connections" (Web Resource) has a set of discussion questions for each of the four sessions in this course that families can talk about after class. Provide each family with a copy of this resource.

Web Connections

Encourage your participants to go to the following Web sites to learn more about Presbyterians who are involved in the stewardship of God's creation and in environmental justice:

- Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Environmental Justice Ministries: pcusa.org/environment
- Presbyterians for Restoring Creation: prcweb.org
- To learn more about initiatives within the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), go to pcusa.org and type *environment* into the search engine.

Explore God's Creation

Arrange for the participants to go on a camping trip or a nature hike in order to connect with God's creation. While experiencing nature, engage the young people in a theological conversation about how humans relate to God's creation. Consider having participants lead children from your congregation on a nature hike and have the youth lead a conversation about creation with the children based on what they've learned in this session.

Mission Project

Have the participants organize a cleanup day for your congregation in which the congregation adopts a roadway or community park that has an abundance of trash. During the experience, have one of the youth read one of the Scripture passages from this session to the participants. Consider having the participants plant native flowers and other native plants during the experience. Discuss the possibility of making this an ongoing project for your congregation.