

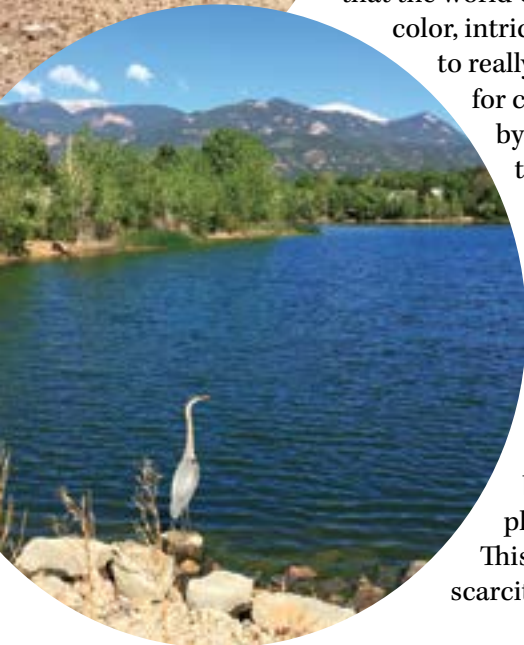
# APPRECIATE GOD'S ABUNDANCE

GENESIS 1:1-2:3;  
PSALM 104;  
MATTHEW 6:28-29

We begin our study by paying attention. Genesis tells us that God declared creation good. The Psalms tell us the earth is the Lord's and all that is in it. We need only look out our window long enough to see that it is true; when we pay attention, we can see the goodness and abundance of God's creation. As we appreciate creation, we reignite our love of it. This helps because we take care of things we love.

The enormity of the challenges presented by climate change can feel overwhelming, and it's tempting to give up in despair. That's why this first aspect of our practice—paying attention to the abundance of God's creation—is so important. When we stop and notice the world beyond us, we can see that the world God created is one of incredible beauty, vibrant color, intricate detail, and vast richness. Taking time to really see what is around us can be a catalyst for change if we allow ourselves to be awed by the power of creation and inspired by the abundance we find there.

Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann says that the Bible begins with the message of abundance. The very first chapter of Genesis is a song of praise for God's generosity. "It tells how well the world is ordered," says Brueggemann. "It declares that God blesses—that is, endows with vitality—the plants and the animals and the fish and the birds and humankind." This is a beautiful vision of abundant life, but so often we focus on scarcity. We want more energy and resources, and often make decisions





out of fear and greed. We fail to see what Brueggemann calls “the overflowing goodness that pours from God’s creator spirit.”<sup>1</sup>

From start to finish, the Bible tells the story of a creation that is not just good, but is “very good” (Genesis 1:31).

To grasp the abundance of God’s creation, it may help to think about a particular part of creation. Have you ever stood outside at night and looked up? The stars and constellations point to a vastness that is hard to wrap our minds around. The light we are seeing now comes from stars that burned out millions of years ago.



Or have you ever looked at a mountain range from a distance? Those peaks and valleys are home to forests and wildlife and lakes and rivers and people. Or have you gotten up close to an anthill on the sidewalk? Hundreds of ants scurry around, off to find food or building materials, on a tiny mission we miss when we walk right by. Or perhaps you have planted a garden of vegetables or flowers. What a miracle it is that, with just a little tending and the right combination of sunlight and water, the earth can produce food. And not just nutritious food to fuel our bodies, but delicious, beautiful food; does anything represent God’s abundance more fully than a ripe tomato fresh from the garden in July?



One of the most striking things about God’s abundant creation is the extravagance of it. God could have, one presumes, created a completely utilitarian world. But instead, God created sunflowers, and mountain lakes, and one-of-a-kind snowflakes, and unique human fingerprints. Colors of every shade imaginable exist in nature, alongside creatures as big as an elephant and as small as an amoeba so tiny we cannot see it with the naked eye.



1. Walter Brueggemann, “The Liturgy of Abundance, the Myth of Scarcity,” *The Christian Century* (March 24, 1999), [www.christiancentury.org/article/2012-01/liturgy-abundance-myth-scarcity](http://www.christiancentury.org/article/2012-01/liturgy-abundance-myth-scarcity).



We begin our practice of caring for creation with this recognition that the world God created is beyond our understanding, full of beauty, abundant in its miracles. When we stop to notice it, we can approach creation with something even beyond appreciation. We find ourselves in awe.

➤ When you look outside, what is the first thing in nature that you notice?

➤ Look again . . . what else can you see?

Sweet the rain's new fall  
sunlit from heaven,  
like the first dewfall  
on the first grass.  
Praise for the sweetness  
of the wet garden,  
sprung in completeness  
where God's feet pass.<sup>2</sup>



Dear God,  
Thank you for the abundance  
of your creation. When I rush right  
by and fail to notice the miracle of  
life right in front of me, help me  
stop, notice, and give you thanks  
for all that you have provided.  
Amen.

2. Eleanor Farjeon, "Morning Has Broken," in *Glory to God* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), #664.

# FINDING THE PRACTICE IN THE BIBLE

The Bible begins with the story of creation, yet the theme of God’s abundance and the goodness of creation seeps its way throughout much of Scripture. The stories of the Bible are deeply rooted in the land, and nature images are often used to describe or engage the divine. We’ll explore two passages here, but each time you read the Bible, pay particular attention to where you see the abundance of God’s creation.

When God began to create the heavens and the earth, the earth was complete chaos, and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. And God saw that the light was good, and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

—Genesis 1:1–5

## IT IS GOOD

The creation story in Genesis 1:1–2:3 might best be described as a hymn of praise, or a poetic recitation of an ancient story, passed down from generation to generation, lifted up in moments of worship. The first three days describe a time of preparation, in which God separates light from darkness, sky from water, land from sea. The second three days show God creating the creatures that will inhabit the prepared space, culminating on day six with the creation of humanity, followed on the seventh day with God’s Sabbath rest. This passage is full of divine activity, with God at work throughout, bringing life to the world.

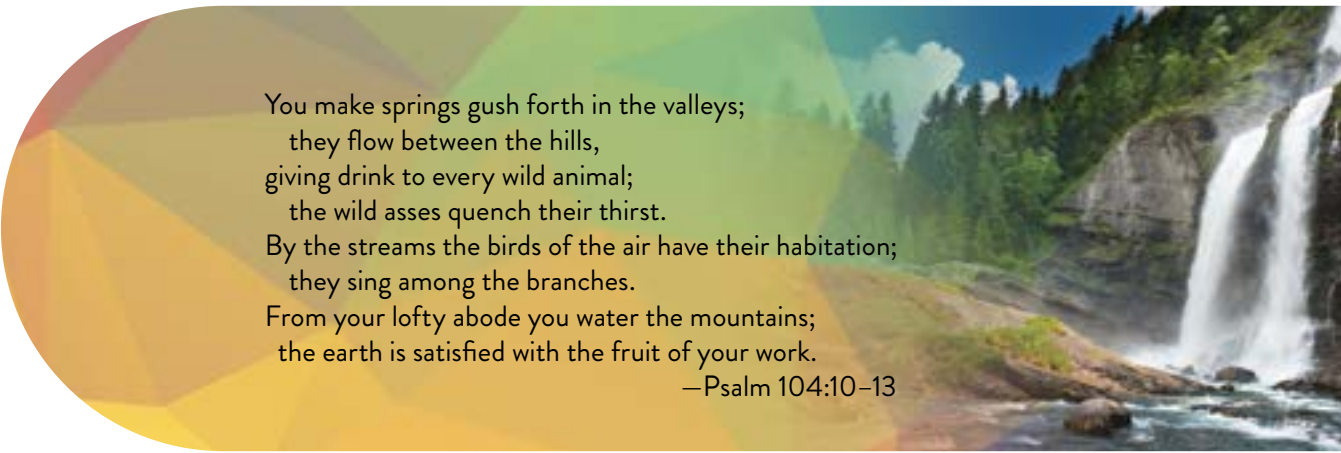
Two themes are of note in this brief look at a complex passage: first, notice how many times God declares creation “good.” From the very beginning, all of creation is infused with the goodness of God. What does this say about how we should approach our task of caring for creation? Second, notice the role of humans in this creation account (we’ll look at the second creation story, in Genesis 2, in the next session). In Genesis 1, God creates humans in God’s image, inviting us into the creative endeavor of God. This unique place in creation includes a responsibility. “If God brings a flourishing world into being,” writes scholar Ted Hiebert, “it is the human’s primary work to ensure that the world continues to flourish as God created it and wishes it to flourish.”<sup>3</sup>

3. Theodore Hiebert, “Genesis,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Bible and Ecology* ed. Hilary Marlow and Mark Harris (Oxford Academic, 2022), 83.

- ✦ How can we, as followers of Jesus, best participate in the flourishing of God's good creation?

### **GOD THE CREATOR AND PROVIDER**

Many psalms praise God for the creation and all that is in it. They were written in a historical context prior to modern science, and they express gratitude for the marvelous complexity and sustaining nature of God's work. Read Psalm 104 in its entirety and reflect on all the gifts of the creation that impact you directly.



You make springs gush forth in the valleys;  
they flow between the hills,  
giving drink to every wild animal;  
the wild asses quench their thirst.  
By the streams the birds of the air have their habitation;  
they sing among the branches.  
From your lofty abode you water the mountains;  
the earth is satisfied with the fruit of your work.  
—Psalm 104:10–13

- ✦ Which lines of the psalm stand out to you?

## CONSIDER THE LILIES

In a number of passages in the Gospels, we find Jesus referencing the natural world as he traveled, taught, and healed. He understood the importance of connecting with creation, and the need to sometimes step away, which is why he said to his disciples, “Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while” (Mark 6:31). They had been healing and teaching, and were so busy that they hadn’t even taken the time to eat. On a mountainside filled with natural beauty, Jesus said to his followers, “Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these” (Matthew 6:28–29). Jesus reminded them that God would provide them with what they needed in terms of food, drink, and clothing. He knew that God had created a world of abundant goodness, in which the needs of all could be met.

➤ Read Genesis 1:1–2:3. What images of creation as described strike you?

➤ Can you think of other Scripture passages that connect to creation?

# FINDING THE PRACTICE THEN AND NOW

I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it. . . . People think pleasing God is all God cares about. But any fool living in the world can see it always trying to please us back.

—Celie's remark about God in *The Color Purple*<sup>4</sup>

Long before global warming or the current climate crisis inspired us to pay attention to God's abundant creation, St. Francis of Assisi was a champion of the natural world as a way to engage the divine. An Italian Catholic friar, Francis served the church in the thirteenth century and has become one of the most revered figures in Christian history. Founder of the Franciscan order, St. Francis was well known for his love of nature and has come to be known as the patron saint of ecology. He understood humans to be equal to the rest of the natural world in the eyes of God. He was known for preaching to birds and other animals; one story has it that he convinced a wolf to live peaceably with its human neighbors. For Francis, creation not only belongs to God; it reflects God's goodness and mercy back to us. The ecological legacy of St. Francis lives on. You might find a statue of Francis talking with a bird in a church courtyard, and some congregations have implemented a "blessing of the animals" in recognition of Francis's love of all creatures.



Mary Plate DeJong works to reclaim and restore green spaces near her home in Seattle. She has won awards for her work and has a master's degree in ecotheology. In an interview, she said that Jesus "used the natural world—the lilies and the birds and all of these natural connections—as teaching points. That is a great invitation to us to see [that] as much as Scripture is revelatory, so is the natural world. The Celtic tradition would say that Christ walks with two shoes—Scripture and the natural world—and without one, he will limp." She encourages people of faith to "put on the other shoe—the natural world—to really do that one up fast and pull it on tight."<sup>5</sup> We put on the shoe of the natural world every time we step out into nature with a willingness to appreciate God's abundance.

4. Alice Walker, *The Colour Purple* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982), 167.

5. J. J. Johnson Leese and Mary Plate DeJong, "Natural Theology," SPU Stories (December 6, 2017), <https://stories.spu.edu/articles/natural-theology/>.

Writer Annie Dillard, in her seminal book *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, shares reflections in her exploration of the creek and woodlands near her home in Virginia’s Blue Ridge Mountains. In the book, she describes how she would go out to the creek and sit for hours, watching the insects, noticing the blades of grass, considering God’s creation. Dillard finds that the more she slows down to observe the natural world, the more appreciation she has for its abundance. She writes, “The answer must be, I think, that beauty and grace are performed whether or not we will or sense them. The least we can do is try to be there.”<sup>6</sup> Wendell Berry is another writer who reminds us that our appreciation of God’s creation is essential to our faith and our hope for the future. A farmer and environmental activist, he uses his writing to call readers to a greater awareness of the natural world.

These saints, pilgrims, and poets point the way to paying attention to the world around us. Only when we take the time to notice the abundance and beauty around us can we begin to care for the gift of God’s creation.

## FOREST BATHING

*Forest bathing* is a practice of taking a short, contemplative walk in a forest. This practice originated in Japan and involves listening to, noticing, and appreciating the vast world of a forest. Forest bathing has been shown to have both mental and physical health benefits including lower heart rate and blood pressure, reduced stress, boosted immunity and mood, and improved overall feeling of well-being.

Watch the YouTube video “Shinrin-Yoku, (Forest Bathing)” ([bit.ly/FMForestBath](https://bit.ly/FMForestBath), 6:05). Try to take deep breaths as you watch the video and immerse yourself in the images and sounds.



## FOREST CHURCH

There is a growing movement around the world of “Wild Churches,” which also go by the names of “Church of the Wild,” “Worship in the Wild,” and “Forest Churches.” These congregations from many different faith traditions and also unchurched people meet in a natural environment and observe and listen to creation to appreciate the Creator’s handiwork, connect with the natural world, and grow closer to God.

Watch the YouTube video “Forest Church, Gloucester. Discovering God Out in the Wilds!” ([bit.ly/FMForestChurches](https://bit.ly/FMForestChurches), 3:34).

✦ What experiences have you had like this? What do you think of them?

6. Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (New York: HarperCollins, 1974), 10.





## VIOLENCE IN CREATION

Those who turn to nature to grow in their faith and appreciation of God's creation will find that the natural world, in addition to its abundance and beauty, can also be violent.

Annie Dillard writes, "I am a frayed and nibbled survivor in a fallen world, and I am getting along. I am aging and eaten and have done my share of eating too. I am not washed and beautiful, in control of a shining world in which everything fits, but instead am wandering awed about on a splintered wreck I've come to care for, whose gnawed trees breathe a delicate air, whose bloodied and scarred creatures are my dearest companions, and whose beauty bats and shines not in its imperfections but overwhelmingly in spite of them."<sup>7</sup>

In the most recent edition of the *Book of Common Worship*, an entirely new section was added titled "Creation and Ecology." In addition to services for the care of creation and a blessing of the animals, there is a service and prayers for situations following natural disasters. See the *Book of Common Worship* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2018), 559–90.

- How does reflecting on nature help or hinder your understanding of our call to care for God's creation?
  
- Have you ever attended a blessing of the animals? What was your experience?
  
- What do you think of the idea that "Christ walks with two shoes"?
  
- What poets and writers have helped inspire you to appreciate God's creation?

7. Dillard, 245.

# PRACTICING THE PRACTICE

There's nothing particularly complicated about actually putting this aspect into practice. It might be easier said than done, but to appreciate the abundance of God's creation, we simply have to pay attention. Here are a few ideas to deepen this practice:



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## GET UP EARLY AND WATCH THE SUNRISE

If you can find a spot with a clear view of the horizon, great, but even watching the sunrise from your kitchen window can be a spiritual practice. Watch the subtle shift from darkness to daylight. Notice what you hear as the day begins: Are there birds singing to greet the morning? What human-made sounds do you hear? What colors do you see in the sky? As you watch, meditate on Lamentations 3:22–23: “The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, / his mercies never come to an end; / they are new every morning; great your faithfulness.”

## KEEP A NATURE JOURNAL

As you move through your day or week, jot down something you notice: a squirrel scampering across the street, the leaves of a tree, the water under a bridge on your way to work. You might also turn this into a photo-a-day practice. After a few weeks, look back at the photos or your journal. What patterns do you notice? Where do you see God's abundance?

## LEARN MORE ABOUT ST. FRANCIS

Look up the saint and read more about his love of animals. Does your congregation do a blessing of the animals? Is that something you might encourage?

What else does your church do to remind yourselves of God's abundance? If possible, plan an outdoor worship service, a picnic in a local park, or a retreat at an outdoor setting.



PAY  
ATTENTION



## CONNECT AND LEARN

Learn about plants and wildlife near you or across the world through exploring an ever-growing list of apps, podcasts, and websites such as these:

### APPS

iNaturalist: identify plants and various wildlife by crowd sourcing

Seek by iNaturalist: identify various wildlife (plants and animals)

vTree (Virginia Tech Tree Identification): identify various trees

Merlin Bird ID by Cornell Lab: identify birds by sight and sound

Star Chart: identify stars, planets, and constellations

### PODCASTS

Completely Arbortrary: learn all about trees

WXPR Field Notes: take an in-depth look at different species of wildlife

Kingdom: Animalia Podcasts: explore the different things animals do

Songbirding: learn to identify birds by their songs

30 Animals That Made Us Smarter: learn about how studying wildlife influences modern human life

Will and Ben, the Wildlife Men: learn about wildlife that is often overlooked

### WEBSITES

[naturetracking.com](http://naturetracking.com): identify different animal tracks

## BE CREATIVE

The gift of creativity is part of God's good creation as well. Take an art class, or buy some inexpensive watercolor paints. Find some clay and form something. Sing in a choir or in the shower. What you create doesn't need to be a masterpiece. Allow the act of creating to remind you of the creative acts of God.



What do you notice? Make a list:

Paying attention to creation doesn't mean you have to go far away. Take this guide outside, wherever you are right now. Look, listen, feel, touch.

# FOLLOWING JESUS

It may seem a bit odd to begin the practice of caring for creation by stopping to appreciate it. Yet we can't take care of something we don't love, can we? Many of us find our lives structured in ways that take us away from concrete, foundational aspects of daily interactions with creation. We awake to the smell and noise of coffee being made, get prepared inside our home to go to work, also inside a building. We stare at a computer and then return home exhausted to watch a television show. The whole day passes without any meaningful interaction with the creation that provided everything we ate, drank, and used during the day.

We learn to appreciate God's abundance when we step out of our homes, offices, and churches and "consider the lilies of the field." At Fairfax Presbyterian Church in Fairfax, Virginia, worship is held on the church lawn on the first Sunday in June, with the songs of birds augmenting the singing of the choir. At University Presbyterian Church in San Antonio, Texas, a garden has been planted between two of its buildings, and a "Green Fact for the Day" appears on the church website. Across the country, camps and conference centers give children, youth, and adults the chance to deepen their faith in the glory of God's creation. In all of these Christian communities, the story of God's activity is found in not only the words of the Bible but also the works of creation. Caring for creation begins with paying attention. May we stop, and notice, and give thanks.



The earth is the LORD's and all  
that is in it,  
the world, and those who live  
in it;  
for he has founded it on the seas,  
and established it on the rivers.  
—Psalm 24:1–2

Lord, may we love all your creation,  
all the earth and every grain of sand in it.  
May we love every leaf, every ray of your light.  
May we love the animals;  
you have given them the rudiments of thought  
and joy untroubled.  
Let us not trouble it;  
let us not harass them,  
let us not deprive them of their happiness,  
let us not work against your intent.  
For we acknowledge unto you that all is like an ocean,  
all is flowing and blending,  
and that to withhold any measure of love  
from anything in your universe  
is to withhold that same measure from you. Amen.  
—Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky (1821–1881)<sup>8</sup>

8. *Book of Common Worship* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018), 589.