

Out of the Wilderness: Building Christian Faith and Keeping God's Creation

"But Jesus withdrew to the wilderness and prayed."

Luke 5:16 (RSV)

THE WILDERNESS TRADITION

Wilderness, places of wild and undisturbed grandeur, is an essential part of the character of America. The Wilderness Act of 1964 enacted special protections for wilderness areas "where the Earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain."

Today wilderness areas provide unique opportunities for recreation, solitude, renewal, and wildlife protection.

Wilderness is also an essential part of the Biblical story. Wilderness areas have been home to some of the most formative events in the Bible. Moses' call to leadership, the exodus of the Israelites, David's character and reputation, Elijah's prophetic vision, John the Baptist's preparation to herald Christ, and Jesus' testing for ministry—all were shaped by God through wilderness experiences. Wilderness has also been an essential place of refuge, solitude, and spiritual formation. Jesus and his disciples frequently retreated to wilderness areas to escape the crowds, to pray, and to renew themselves for ministry.¹

Wilderness Vision. Time spent in the wilderness can deepen our appreciation for God's creation and our role as its stewards. Wilderness experiences foster humility through creation's grandeur, and open restorative avenues as we exchange the rat race for nature's pace. We come out of the wilderness with a deeper respect for God's providence, a clearer vision of our place in God's creation, and with renewed energy for ministry and service.



"Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness." Luke 4:1 (NRSV)

GIFTS OF WILDERNESS

Appreciating the Christian Story. One gift of wilderness to Christians is to provide a fuller and more experiential sense of the power and significance of biblical stories. Many important biblical stories involve wilderness. The meaning of these stories can be enhanced by our own experiences in the wilderness. In fact, most participants in outdoor programs rank a wilderness trip as being one of the most significant events of their life,² and an entire industry and profession of wilderness therapy has emerged because of the physical, psychological, spiritual, and developmental benefits of wilderness experiences.

Knowledge of God. Wilderness provides an excellent setting for learning about God. St. Paul explains in Romans 1:20 that people are without excuse for knowing about God, since God's invisible qualities and divine na-

ture are revealed in what God has created. As the Psalmist declared, the heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament proclaims God's handiwork (19:1). Theologian Basil Pennington puts it another way: "The whole of creation bespeaks its Maker. As the Greeks would say, the whole of creation is full of logoi, little words, that give expression to the Logos, the Word."³

Contemplation, Communion, Renewal. Wilderness also provides space in which to become more aware of God's presence. "Be still and know that I am God," says the Psalmist (46:10). St. Augustine preached that our souls are restless until they rest in God. The solace afforded by wilderness invites us to discover another claim of the Psalmist: "he leads me beside still waters, he restores my soul" (23:2-3). Jesus' example of frequent retreat to wilderness for prayer and solitude reminds us to discover the value of doing likewise. Time in wilderness connects us with God in many ways. We, like Elijah (I Kings 19), may even hear the still small voice of God in the wilderness.

Spiritual Formation and Call. The solitude of wilderness provides excellent opportunities for the spiritual practices of prayer, contemplation, self-examination, reflection, and scripture reading. In the wilderness, heightened physical sensory awareness parallels heightened spiritual awareness. Wonder at the outstanding beauty of untrammelled nature, beholding God's artistry, and celebrating the intended harmony of God's creation fosters spiritual revelation and insight.

"But ask the animals, and they will teach you; the birds of the air, and they will tell you; speak to the earth, and it will teach you; and the fish of the sea will declare to you. Who among all these does not know that the hand of the Lord has done this?" Job 12:7-9 (NRSV)

Refuge. Wilderness in biblical times was often a place of refuge for the persecuted or pursued. Today, we may be more likely to think of wilderness as a refuge from the "modern" world. Wilderness can be a place of Sabbath rest from our trials and labors. It also provides refuge for wildlife and endangered species, preserving critical habitat for God's creatures to flourish. In the US, wilderness designation is one of the highest forms of protection for God's creation.

Camp Fowler is a Reformed Church in America denominational camp located in the Adirondacks near Speculator, New York. Camp management has been working since 1987 to integrate creation care into the camp's operation. One of the primary programs at Fowler are wilderness Outcamps. These teen wilderness trips are designed to foster reflection and learning about God and God's creation, and emphasize humankind's stewardship role. Camp Fowler also pursues an ethos of simplicity. The camp uses solar panels, organic gardens, green purchasing, and composting to meet its material needs. For more information, including the camp's ecological "master plan": www.campfowler.org

A THREATENED HERITAGE

In biblical times and during the early American frontier period, wild places for people and wildlife were readily at hand. As development began to threaten the continued existence of wild lands in the U.S., Americans responded by establishing a system of federal land management and protection agencies. The Wilderness Act of 1964 created our most reliable protective designation for wild areas, and since then, Congress has continued to grant wilderness designation to deserving wild lands.

But wilderness and wild lands remain at risk. Lands bordering wilderness are usually not protected from development pressures, and the majority of qualifying wild public lands administered on behalf of Americans by the U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management currently lack legal protection as wilderness.⁴ In recent years, the sanctity of wildlife refuges and wild areas lacking wilderness status has been threatened further by logging, road-building, and oil and gas development. Recent court rulings have declared some of these practices illegal, renewing the hope that these lands will remain protected. However, lands that lack official wilderness protection remain vulnerable.

A biblical land ethic cannot condone poor stewardship of our last remaining wild lands. Wild lands stand as sanctuaries for wildlife and reservoirs for clean air and water, making them one of our best means of faithful stewardship. The Bible also clearly states that people of

faith are to provide for the redemption of God's land (see Lev 25:23-24), by restraining our ownership and development of land. The consequences of disobedience to this mandate include the desolation of the land and exile of the people (Lev 26:32-35)—a lesson that many fallen cultures have learned the hard way.

Wild lands serve a vital role in preserving creation, but ecologically speaking, wilderness areas cannot stand alone as islands of protective habitat. Adjoining lands and wildlife corridors (tracts of land that enable wildlife mobility for food, shelter, and water) to other protected areas must also be maintained. Once roads or other developments are made in wild areas, their availability as wilderness is lost for generations to come. Our actions today will determine whether we will preserve an "enduring resource of wilderness" for future generations.

For more information on threats to wilderness, visit the Sierra Club's land protection page (www.sierraclub.org/lands) or peruse "Threats to Wilderness" at: www.wilderness.net/index.cfm?fuse=NWPS&sec=threats

The Wilderness Act of 1964 established statutory protections for lands falling under its definition of wilderness, lands where: "the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man finds himself a visitor who does not remain." Wilderness areas are designated by Congress (based on citizen proposals or executive or land agency recommendations) from among federal lands that are generally undeveloped and relatively primeval in character, where "man's work [is] substantially unnoticeable," and where there are outstanding opportunities for solitude or primitive and unconfined types of recreation. All four federal land agencies (National Park Service, US Forest Service, US Fish and Wildlife Service, and Bureau of Land Management) are required to manage their wilderness areas in accord with the common standards of the National Wilderness Preservation System established by the Wilderness Act.

"Woe to those who join house to house and add field to field until there is no more room and you are made to dwell alone in the midst of the land." Isaiah 5:8 (RSV)

Boise Vineyard—Pastor Tri Robinson's church, Boise Vineyard, has received national attention for its growing "tending the garden" ministry. Church members work on trail maintenance projects in nearby National Forests, and lead wilderness trips and retreats for families and youth. Pastor Robinson published a book titled: *Saving God's Green Earth*, and the church has developed a documentary DVD of their environmental stewardship work. The church's art gallery currently houses congregants' artwork reflecting their interpretations of how quiet contemplative space and the beauty of creation bring us closer to God. For more information: www.letstendthegarden.org

A "roadless area" is an area of unprotected wild land. While it is a potential wilderness area, it remains unprotected from activities such as logging, road-building, oil-drilling, or dirt-bike use.

Restoring Eden—When Peter Illyn founded Restoring Eden in 2001, he hoped to foster environmental stewardship in churches. Restoring Eden encourages nature appreciation, creation care, and advocacy as service to God by partnering with churches, non-profit groups, and ecumenical bodies to build a community of Christian creation stewardship. Restoring Eden hosts an email newsletter, and is engaged in campaigns addressing endangered species, empowerment of subsistence, tribal cultures, and oil drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. For more information: www.restoringeden.org/about

SERMON STARTERS

Personal Wilderness Stories. Many people have had powerful experiences of God’s presence in outdoor or wilderness places. Connecting personal stories of inspiration, testing, or renewal with biblical wilderness passages can help bring the biblical narrative to life. God’s people can be awakened to God in “wild” ways. Consider Martin Luther’s encounter with thunder, or Tri Robinson’s mountainside epiphany (www.letstendthegarden.org/main/bio_tri.htm). Stories of other’s inspiration such as Beldon Lane (www.spiritualitytoday.org/spir2day/91432lane.html) and Richard Fairchild (www.rockies.net/~spirit/sermons/b-le01sn.php) can also preach well.

God Provides. A common theme of biblical wilderness stories is God’s provision. God cared for Hagar and Ishmael in the wilderness (Gen 16, 21); God provided for the Israelites in the exodus and for prophets such as Elijah (e.g., 1 Kgs 19); Jesus fed the 5,000 in a remote place (Mt 14; Jn 6). Yet, when the Israelites tried to keep more than the daily portion of manna that God provided, it became inedible (Ex 16:19-21). This adds meaning to the prayer: “Give us this day our daily bread,” and serves as a reminder that God is the primary bread-winner (Dt 8:16-20; see also Jn 6:47-51). Wilderness living tends to strip us down to the essentials. These wilderness lessons commend a more simple life, one not tied up and exhausted with material concerns (e.g., “consider the lilies” of Mt 6:25-34).

The Book of Nature. Jesus recognized that we do “not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord” (Dt 8:3; Mt 4:4). If indeed creation bespeaks its maker (Rom 1:20), and if each part of creation is a *logoi*, a little word, that gives expression to the Logos, the Word, then in faith we also live by contemplating God’s good creation. As Martin Luther noted: “God writes the Gospel, not in the Bible alone, but also on trees, and in the flowers and clouds and stars.” Consciously or not, perhaps this is the source of sacred inspiration for some nature lovers. Since the church’s earliest days, Christian theologians have referred to this source of inspiration as the Book of Nature—God’s complement to the Book of Scripture. The Book of Nature can be read anywhere, of course, but its letters can be discerned most clearly in the pristine and undisturbed quality of wilderness.

The Question of Grazing. Occasional conflict has arisen between cattle ranchers and strict wilderness advocates over the question of grazing rights, especially where new wilderness designation is perceived as a threat to ranching culture. Biblical perspectives can shed light on such debates. For instance, the Hebrew term for wilderness, *midbar*, connotes a place where cattle are driven—reflecting the dispersed nomadic herding of the ancient Near East. The Wilderness Act likewise makes allowances for maintaining grazing where it already exists when an area is designated as wilderness. So both the Wilderness Act and the Bible envision a degree of co-existence between wilderness and grazing. At the same time, rabbinical commentaries warn against overgrazing, and prophets such as Ezekiel levy related warnings: “Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture, but you must also tread down with your feet the rest of your pasture? When you drink of clear water, must you foul the rest with your feet?” (Ez 34:18 NRSV) These passages reinforce the biblical mandate for careful stewardship of God’s creation, and place responsible limits on our use of land. A biblical view thus preserves the hope that good shepherds can enjoy the fruits of God’s creation while preserving and protecting creation’s fruitfulness at the same time.



Assurance of God's Love

Leader: The good news is this: in Christ all things are reconciled and renewed.

People: Praise be to God.

Leader: With all of creation let us therefore praise the Lord.

People: May heaven and earth rejoice with us in the freedom of our salvation.

Sending Forth: Acts of Commitment

Leader: Creator God, you bless all creation to be fruitful.

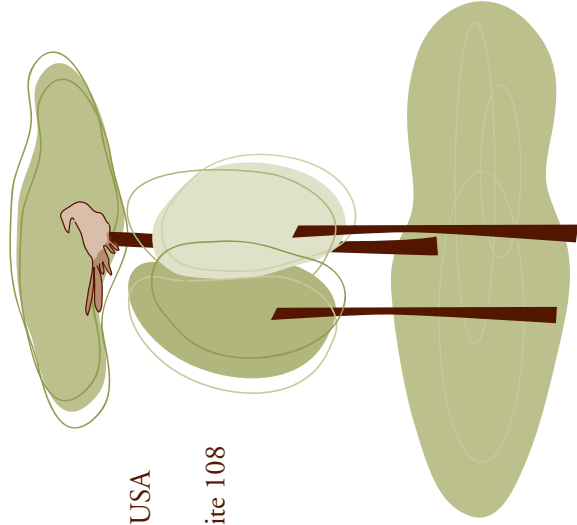
People: In your spirit, guide our steps.

Leader: In the wilderness, you renew our vision.

People: Out of the wilderness, help us prepare the Way of God.

Leader: In a world groaning in travail,

People: Let us bring peace to all creation through Christ our Lord.



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“But Jesus withdrew to the wilderness and prayed.”

Luke 5:16 (RSV)

Wilderness and wild landscapes are deeply woven into Christianity and many other faith traditions. They were central to the spiritual journeys of Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad and in the creation stories of many cultures. Today, wilderness is important to many of us as a venue for peaceful reflection and reconnecting with the Creator.

Wilderness areas offer a unique opportunity to celebrate and protect the lands God has entrusted to us. Amid cities and highways, wilderness serves to preserve God's creation, offering sanctuary for humans and wildlife and leaving space for natural cycles.

Note: This liturgy can also be celebrated in an outdoor place. Consider starting worship with silent meditation—“Be still and know that I am God” (Ps 46:10).



Gathering Meditation (Celtic prayer—Iona Community)

Leader: There is no plant in the ground

People: But tells of your beauty, O Christ.

Leader: There is no creature on the earth,

There is no life in the sea

People: But proclaims your goodness.

Leader: There is no bird on the wing,

There is no star in the sky,

There is nothing beneath the sun

People: But is full of your blessing.

All: Lighten my understanding of your presence all around, O Christ

Kindle my will to be caring for Creation.

(or)

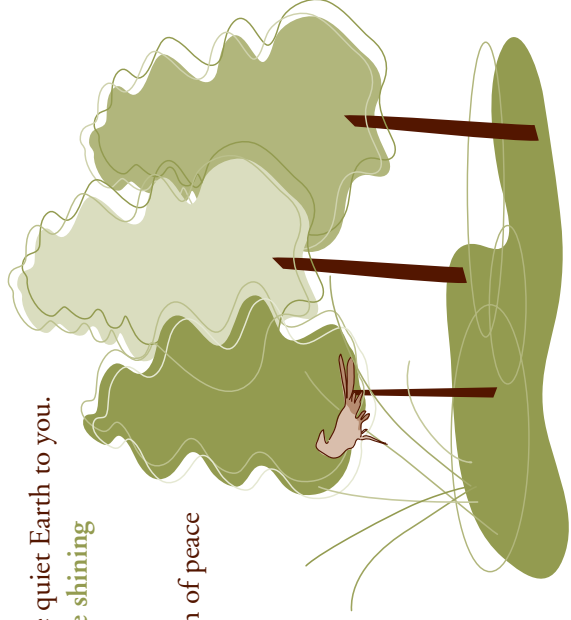
Leader: Deep peace of the running wave to you.

People: Deep peace of the flowing air to you.

Leader: Deep peace of the quiet Earth to you.

People: Deep peace of the shining stars to you.

All: Deep peace of the Son of peace to you.



Proclamation of Praise (from Psalm 104)

Today we celebrate the work of our Creator. Let us praise God!

Praise God, O my soul!

You have set the Earth firmly on its foundations, and it will never be moved.

Praise God, O my soul!

You provide water for the wild animals.

Praise God, O my soul!

From the sky you send rain on the hills, and the Earth is filled with your blessings.

Praise God, O my soul!

You created the moon to mark the months; the sun knows what time to set.

Praise God, O my soul!

Lord, you have made so many things! How wisely you made them all!

All depend on you.

I will sing to the Lord all my life; as long as I live I will sing praises to God.

Prayer of Confession

Creator God, everything we have comes from you. You abundantly provide for our needs, giving us daily bread and offering the bread of life. But we fail in the face of many temptations. Instead of trusting your provision, we exploit your creation and hoard an unfair portion. Instead of relying on your power, we strive for worldly success. Instead of trusting in your protection, we exploit others and the Earth to defend our selfish interests. In our sin, we fail to protect your creation's fruitfulness; we defile your artistry; we disrupt the doxology of your creatures. The heavens and the Earth testify against us. But we return to you in repentance, and ask your forgiveness. Gracious God, renew our faith. Fill us with your love that we may extend your peace and reconciliation to all creation.

IDEAS FOR YOUTH GROUPS OR SUNDAY SCHOOL

Beholding Creation: Outdoor meditation on Genesis 1:

After instructing a group to study and pray over Genesis 1, gather the group together well before sunrise, dressed appropriately for the weather. Hand out copies of the text of Genesis 1:1-2:4, and ask each group member to go to their own “quiet place” as the sun rises. Reconvene the group after the sun rises to share reflections on the experience. The group might then work together to draft a call to worship, responsive reading, or psalm based on Genesis 1.

Be Still and Know That I Am God (Ps 46:10): Seat your group in a quiet place for a period of silent reflection. Have one person read the verse “Be still and know I am God.” After a pause, have each remaining person, in turn, read the verse, dropping off one additional word for each reading until the last person reads only “Be.” This activity works well as a break from a trail hike, or can be done in conjunction with other reflective activities.

Little Words: Invite the group to “read” the words (logoi) of God’s creation by observing and contemplating nature. Then ask each person to write a poem or draw a picture to express what they’ve learned. Ask the group to share their creations. Romans 1:20, John 1:1-8, or other passages and quotes can be examined to prepare the group for this exercise.

Wilderness Collage: Collect magazines, newspapers, colored markers or crayons, blank paper, and clear tape. Have the group close their eyes and reflect on any wilderness experiences they have. Then, ask them to create a personal or small group collage using the materials you provide. Have group members share their collages and reflections with the group.

Hiking, camping, hunting, fishing, picnicking, kayaking and canoeing, swimming, backpacking, horseback riding, rafting, skiing, snow-shoeing, bird-watching, and many other forms of recreation are allowed in wilderness areas. The Wilderness Act protects our wilderness areas from logging, road-building, and vehicle use (except in cases of emergencies), including both motor vehicles (such as snowmobiles, off-road vehicles and dirt bikes) and other mechanical vehicles including mountain bikes.⁵

PUTTING OUR FAITH IN ACTION

Many avenues exist for Christians to demonstrate their faith in action and honor the biblical wilderness legacy.

- **Participate in a Wilderness Retreat.** Many churches sponsor wilderness retreats and expeditions, such as Sunnyvale Presbyterian Church near San Jose, CA (www.svpc.us/wilderness.html). Other organizations can help you or your congregation plan and lead wilderness programs, such as Climbing for Christ (www.climbingforchrist.org/), Opening the Book of Nature (www.bookofnature.org/), and Desert Spirituality (www.desertspirituality.com/).
- **Conduct a land stewardship project** with your church in conjunction with National Public Lands Day. For more information go to www.publiclandsday.org/
- **Speak Out.** Write a letter to your local newspaper or elected official educating them about the importance of wilderness from a faith perspective. To learn the status of current, pending, and expected wilderness legislation, visit: www.leaveitwild.org/psapp/view_page.asp?PEB_PAGE_ID=5

RESOURCES

- To learn more about wilderness or wilderness campaigns in your area, visit:
 - Campaign for America’s Wilderness (www.leaveitwild.org/psapp/)
 - Wilderness.net
 - NCC’s Wilderness webpage (www.ncccojustice.org/wildhome.htm)

To monitor current news releases about wilderness, visit: www.leaveitwild.org/psapp/view_page.asp?PEB_PAGE_ID=1

Endnotes

¹ Susan Power Bratton elaborates these and other themes in *Christianity, Wilderness, and Wildlife: The Original Desert Solitaire* (Scranton, University of Scranton Press, 1993).

² Kellert, S. & Derr, V. (1998). *National study of outdoor wilderness experience*. Washington, DC: Island Press.

³ This notion follows from the theology of St. Maximus the Confessor (580-662ad).

⁴ Taken from Campaign for America’s Wilderness: Questions & Answers.

⁵ Adapted from Campaign for America’s Wilderness: Questions & Answers. See also: <http://www.wilderness.net/index.cfm?fuse=NWPS&sec=whatIsWilderness>

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WILDERNESS DEFINITIONS

Greek: eremos/eremia—desert; isolated, remote, solitary, or lonely place

Hebrew: midbar—uninhabited land, land used to pasture flocks, abode of wild animals

Middle English: wilderness—wild place, place of wild animals

Websters: wilderness area—an area of public land, as of virgin forest, preserved in its natural state by prohibiting the construction of roads, buildings, etc.



For more information on how you can help protect God's lands visit the National Council of Churches Eco-Justice Program website at www.ncccecojustice.org or call 202-544-2350.

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“And God said, ‘Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear.’ And it was so.” Genesis 1:9

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