

CULTI ATING FAITH

2023 Devotional

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Introduction: CULTIVATING FAITH

Creation care is one of the core tenets of our Christian witness (Gen 2:15). Genesis 1 gives us a beautiful image of the rich biodiversity of God's good creation. We feel the effects and see the environment deteriorating in a way that begs the time-sensitive question of us as God's entrusted agents within creation to steward its wellbeing: what have we done and what are we called to do now?

Rapidly changing climates worldwide are forcing migration from now-uninhabitable regions due to drought, flooding, and other extreme weather patterns. At BCC, we see this directly impact the lives of those served by our global and local ministry partners, Agros International and World Relief. From the livelihood of rural farmers in Nicaragua to those facing extreme drought in the Turkana region of Kenya, the impacts of environmental degradation are being felt most acutely by our brothers and sisters in developing parts of the globe. As Christians, our response comes out of our understanding of Christ and call to love our neighbor as ourself, rather than from a purely economic or political perspective.

In Genesis 1:26-28, God directly linked the stewardship of creation to the invitation for humanity to flourish among it. To that end, we're partnering with Agros International, World Relief, and Circlewood to illuminate this critically important aspect of our Christian discipleship and invite God to speak to us both individually and collectively on how to join in His ongoing story of redeeming all things. We want to be living as part of God's creation: sewing seeds of faith that indeed the church can make all things new in the most challenging issues facing our world today. Let us rediscover a cultivating faith together!

This booklet is designed to expand our imagination around real-life impacts of environmental degradation and creative solutions coming about through our ministry partners locally and globally. Each week, you are invited to participate in a liturgy of Scripture reading, testimony, reflection, practice, and prayer that accompanies our six-week sermon series. We encourage you to use this individually, with roommates, family, or friends. See the final section for more ideas about engaging as a family.



Photos provided by Agros International

Week 1: Creation is Good

SCRIPTURE: Genesis 1:1-12

At Agros International, the land is everything. To the rural families we serve, owning a plot of land to call their own is beyond their wildest imaginations. Most of Agros' families "in their former lives" worked as day laborers, selling their labor to plantation owners picking coffee or preparing a field for cultivation. Owning their own land was beyond hope. Through Agros, that unimaginable dream is becoming a reality. Yet, as monumental as owning a piece of land is, creating a productive, profitable farming enterprise is becoming more and more difficult due to climate impacts.

To engage with this reality, Agros initiated its Climate Smart Agricultural Initiative four years ago to train and support our farming families in production and stewardship practices to mitigate the impacts of how the environment is changing, help them adapt to the adverse climate conditions (droughts, heat, tropical storms, longer rainy seasons), and realize the greatest productivity and profitability possible.

This includes Agros' agricultural technicians training farmers in 18 practices designed to mitigate and adapt to climate impacts while maximizing productivity. One significant shift for our farmers has been the adoption and local production of biofertilizers and biopesticides ("bio" meaning "organic"). This reduces dependence on chemical and petroleum-based fertilizers/pesticides significantly.

Organics technician Samuel begins the bio-material "brewing" process by traveling into the surrounding mountains and "harvesting" a barrel of mountain soil rich in dark organic earth saturated with plant and animal microorganisms called *humus*. That *humus* becomes the base for the organic fertilizer mixed and brewed with other organic materials in Agros' small biomaterials plant (the secret "brewing" ingredient is molasses).

As a result of our farmers' focus on using organics, we've seen a reduction in their use of chemicals by 60% and their costs by nearly 20%, revealing success in mitigation, adaptation, and productivity.

In Genesis 1 & 2, we see an image of extraordinary abundance, diversity, and life. One present-day example of this extraordinary abundance is the humus that Samuel collects. It is a tangible gift reflecting God's creativity, generosity, and call to be careful stewards of His good gifts.

REFLECTION:

1. From the Genesis passage, what images or ideas of abundance do you see or are drawn to?
2. Where and how do you see or feel abundance in your life right now? How do you, or would you like to, show gratitude for that abundance?
3. When have you had to think differently and creatively to adapt or mitigate while maintaining productivity and purpose?

PRACTICE PLANTING:

Place your Sweet Basil plant with good access to sunlight and where you will regularly see it. Keep soil moist by adding a little water every 2-3 days. Put something underneath the pot to collect water that drains out. Let every time you see this little sprout be a reminder that God spoke, "It is good" over creation.

PRAYER:

God, thank you for the abundant creation you've made—streams, mountains, sunshine, plants, animals—all of it a gift. Thank you for the blessing it is to dwell among this beauty and your design for us to flourish as an interdependent part of your ecosystem of creation. Give us eyes to see your gifts in creation around us. Amen.



Week 2: The Land Mourns

SCRIPTURE: Genesis 4:9-16

In 2015, Agros purchased a large former coffee plantation in the highlands of Nicaragua to create the village of *La Bendicion* - “The Blessing.” About 35 families left surrounding communities where they were working as day laborers and sought this new opportunity and adventure of land ownership. However, *La Bendicion* was not initially a blessing. About that same time, the coffee plants became irreparably diseased with *La Roya*, commonly known as “coffee rust” due to persistent warmer temperatures at higher elevations. This is a fungus that seriously damages the plant and significantly reduces coffee berry production.

It was devastating to the point of despair. Did these families leave their neighbors, extended family, and livelihood only to falter here in this place where the land was showing signs of mourning? Were these families destined to work the ground in an area that could no longer yield crop?

Boris Corpeno, Agros’ Agriculture Director at the time, arrived at a radical solution to the crisis: replace all diseased coffee plants with new “rust-resistant” plants. Investing in a hybrid coffee plant (where branches of an arabica plant are grafted to the roots and trunk of a robusto plant). It took over three years to replace the plants, and the results have been amazing.

As of this year, 17 of the 41 families in *La Bendicion* have paid off their land loans and gained the land title—three years ahead of schedule. Juana Chavarria arrived in this community in 2016 as a single parent of seven children. Juana had previously endured working in plantations for more than 30 years to keep her family alive and fed. She says, “I felt like a slave to the plantation owners,” but now she is one of the most successful coffee farmers in the community and is one of the families who has fully paid for her land. We see God’s redemption in her story! Today, Juana owns and operates a five-acre coffee plantation of her own. The story of “rust” to restoration continues as her two sons Edwin and Eric also own their land in *La Bendicion*.

REFLECTION:

1. Have you ever pursued a new opportunity (place, relationship, job) only to be disappointed?
2. Have you had a time when you’ve experienced God putting his “mark” of protection on you? What was that like?
3. Agros, Juana, and the other families of *La Bendicion* took a considerable risk through faith and hard work to turn their common challenge into a transformative opportunity. In what ways is that particularly encouraging to you right now, or might you be an encouragement to someone in your life that feels stuck and without hope?

PRACTICE PLANTING:

Turn your basil every few days so new sides and leaves get to feel the light of the sun. This strengthens the stem as it bends in the opposite direction. Nature is both delicate and strong; let this little plant remind you of the ways understanding creation helps us care for it well.

PRAYER:

Father, we lament the many ways we see creation groaning around us. We repent of the harm we’ve caused to your creation. We pray for those impacted by environmental degradation near and far, and we ask for compassionate hearts to respond in restorative ways for the coming of your kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.



Week 3: Reconciling All Things

SCRIPTURE: Colossians 1:18-20

Around the year 2000, brothers Krishna and Girvesh from a farming family in Bhutan, were forced by persecution to flee. Even now, they miss their cherished home and the places they will likely never see again. Initially, they lived in a refugee camp in Nepal and brought their skills to nearby Nepalese farmers. They assisted in planting and harvesting crops, bringing a small part of their homeland memories to their new surroundings. After many years, they were selected for resettlement in the Seattle area, where they began the hard work of learning English and new job skills. They settled into an apartment and a way of life so different from the home they had fled. During this time, World Relief Western Washington coached, encouraged, and prayed for them.

Meanwhile, a congregation in Kent had been praying about what resources their small church could provide to show God's love to the weary but resilient refugees from around the globe. Just a few miles from their church were many refugees who were being welcomed and served at the World Relief office.

God gave them an answer just under their nose - or, more specifically, their tires. The church was surrounded on three sides by a parking lot larger than needed for their current congregation and mainly used on Sundays. Like many large parking lots, the water runoff, heat reflection, and asphalt pavement were not earth-friendly. They began wondering if there was a better way to use this patch of earth?

Over the next few years a large portion of the Hillside Church parking lot was de-paved and repurposed into the Paradise Parking Plots Community Garden. Refugees from around the world, including Krishna and Girvesh, are finding community there, growing foods they remember from home, learning about new plants from their garden neighbors, and experiencing some of the peace initiated by the cross of Jesus.

Joni Mitchell once lamented, "They paved paradise and put up a parking lot," but here, this has been wonderfully reversed.

REFLECTION:

1. Watch the video at bit.ly/paradiseplots to learn more about Paradise Parking Plots. Write or talk about the ways reconciliation and restoration in nature and in relationships can overlap and even build on each other.
2. Is there a portion of ground in your neighborhood that could be a community garden patch for a season? What other opportunities exist in your neighborhood for the community to gather and make positive use of the land you share together?
3. Are there places around you where the cycle of "paving paradise and putting up a parking lot" can be wonderfully reversed? What vision might God be giving you for this to come about in small and big ways?

PRACTICE PLANTING:

Continue to provide the rhythm of care for your little plant that it needs to survive, and develop a habit of checking, watering, and turning.

PRAYER:

Gracious God, thank you for the visual image of peace and reconciliation in this story and in this plant. Remind me of the ways your gift of peace is always around - in both the abundance and beauty of nature and your kindness shown through strangers. Show me how to cultivate beauty and kindness in my own life, even as I'm cultivating this plant. Amen.



Week 4: The Heavens Declare

SCRIPTURE: Psalm 19:1-2

Last year, when asked why the lyrics of U2's songs aren't more explicitly Christian, Bono answered, "Look at the creation, look at the trees, look at the sky, look at these kinds of verdant hills. They don't have a sign that says, 'Praise the Lord' or 'I belong to Jesus.' They just give glory to Jesus."

Many experience this day-to-day reminder of nature's glory and need no reminder, but for people whose lives and livelihoods depend on nature—rivers that flood, fields that turn to dust, and homes that are swept away by tornados or burned by wildfires—nature can seem like an uncaring enemy.

In the Rwandan village of Bambiro, Epiphanie and her husband Jeremy were struggling to see the glory of God declared in nature as they struggled to feed their children. Rising temperatures and drought meant they could no longer grow enough crops; the environment grew harsh and the ground unyielding. Their neighbor, Jean Claude, had received training through the local church and shared the methods he had learned to grow crops that withstand heavy rains and prolonged drought.

With Jean Claude's guidance, they soon had a garden full of nutritious food. As the crops flourished, so did their hope. Jeremy explained how the plants had provided more than food: "After being trained in kitchen gardening, food preparation, and food selection, I changed my priorities. I no longer buy alcohol in replacement for food. I try my best to provide different kinds of food varieties to my family daily. My wife and children need it, as well as me."

God reminds us that the rivers, fields, plants, and animals are always giving glory to God. One way we love God is to love His creation, and it's always right there to be seen, even if your hardships have blocked the view. This is a hope worth clinging to.

REFLECTION:

1. Who do you know, even peripherally, who works hard to make a living for themselves and their family? How could you encourage them?
2. Ask God to bring people to your mind from your neighborhood, job, or school who are suffering because of a hardship. Pray for a way to encourage them in this season.
3. Make a list of characteristics of God that come to your mind. For example, God is our refuge; a help in trouble; faithful. For each attribute on your list, think of something in the natural world that reminds you of this characteristic of God.

PRACTICE PLANTING:

As your basil sprout grows, it might want more space soon! Consider repotting to give more space for roots to stretch and grow. A way to steward this sprout well is to provide it the right space and area it needs to grow; this will bring more leaves and a stronger plant.

PRAYER:

Heavenly Father, you show yourself through the earth. This little plant is more than just the bigger plant it will become. It is a source of hope and a reflection that you are always here, continuing to love and provide for everything you created. At the same time, everything you created is always pointing back to you, revealing your goodness and your greatness. Thank you, Jesus. Amen.



Week 5: Abide

SCRIPTURE: John 15:1-11

Circlewood is a ministry devoted to “accelerating the greening of faith.” At the heart is the development of Circlewood Village, a unique learning center within our 40-acre forest on Camano Island. The village will be a model of regenerative living and a place for people to learn a more ecologically-grounded way of life and faith to transform their home communities.

On my first visit to the forest in 2017, I noticed a small frog hopping into the surrounding undergrowth. I reached in to see if I could gently pick it up but came away with a fistful of stinging nettles instead. The next few days, I had a painful reminder of all I needed to learn as my hand throbbed with what felt like hundreds of tiny stingers. I began to make plans to eradicate this noxious weed from the forest.

Before my plans could be enacted, we invited local permaculture experts to walk the land and share their wisdom. When they saw the nettles, they declared, “Wow, you’ve got quite a crop growing here!” Turns out, nettle leaves can be eaten straight from the plant (carefully) or boiled and made into soup, tea, pudding, pesto, and wine. The long fibers in the nettles’ stems can be made into cords, and the plants offer critical butterfly habitats. Where I saw “weed,” better-trained eyes saw “fruit.”

A “cultivating faith” affirms all of creation as intrinsically valuable, even the thorny plants and thorny people we encounter. It also cultivates shalom by recognizing the fruit of all God’s creatures, even those with the potential to sting us. Finally, it calls us to abide in Jesus so that our fruit can ripen and bless God’s beautiful and broken world.

REFLECTION:

1. What “weeds” have you sought to eradicate that might have hidden fruit in them?
2. How might our treatment of unwanted plants/animals be connected to our treatment of unwanted people?
3. What fruit from your life has God used to bless creation?

PRACTICE PLANTING:

Continuing to care for your basil plant has allowed it to grow bigger and stronger. Maintain the habits of caring for it, while recognizing when it needs water, to be relocated or repotted, or to be trimmed. Whether you are an experienced gardener, or this is your first plant, there are things that can be learned from creation.

PRAYER:

Gracious God, creator of all, thank you for the seeds that spring from the earth and for those that spring from my life. Help me to see the fruit all around me, especially that which is born from plants, people, or places that I have overlooked or undervalued. Give me the courage and grace to abide in you so that I may continue to bring forth your fruit from my life. In Jesus’ name, Amen.



Week 6: All New Things

SCRIPTURE: Revelation 21:5, 2 Corinthians 5:17, & Galatians 6:15

A few years ago, a young woman knocked on my front door encouraging me to sign a petition in favor of an upcoming law that would increase environmental protections in Washington State. Seeing our shared passion for the environment, I told her about Circlewood and our mission, “to accelerate the greening of faith.” She responded saying, “Oh, I grew up going to church, but that’s not a part of my life anymore. My mom still goes, but I don’t.”

In my specific role, and in the Pacific Northwest in general, I get to meet many passionate people working to restore damaged ecosystems and reconcile humanity’s relationship to the earth. Interestingly, many of them do not presently profess to be Christians but have had significant exposure to the faith at some point in their life. Sadly, the connection between loving creation and loving the Creator has not yet been made, or has in some cases been compromised. I believe we can and we need to do more as the Church to integrate these two as core pieces of our faith.

At its worst, the church has been quiet or even ambivalent towards creation care. As a result, we hear phrases like, “Christians are so heavenly minded that they are no earthly good.” It’s not necessarily for lack of compassion or appreciation for the earth! In fact, many Christians are doing good things, big and small, to care for the environment. Rather, it’s for a lack of theology that makes the critically important connection between our faith and the earth.

In recent history, the Church has focused on a distant heaven as the goal and destination of faith. This falls short of the full narrative of Scripture in which God wants to reconcile and redeem creation itself—indeed making all things new. Thus, there is inherent value and purpose for the earth, and as human beings, we are invited by God to have a role in making all things new. We ourselves are restored to the Father from sin and brokenness, and we are called to participate in the rest of creation’s restoration to its Creator.

So, as we live with a posture of being part of nature with an eye towards making all things new, we have an opportunity to shepherd a new legacy of the Church in our era by joining together with Christ in the redemption of all things rather than escaping the world with a ticket punched for heaven. When we embrace a holistic and integrated view of our faith, perhaps we can better make room for people like this woman at my door to love creation and feel connected to their Creator.

REFLECTION:

1. Do you know someone who cares for the earth but has rejected Christian faith?
2. How does your perspective on the importance of the earth and how it connects with your faith provide an opportunity for conversation with them?
3. Our faith is not towards a distant heaven but a heavenly earth (the new creation). What might you want to change in your daily discipleship to live into this more? What could you imagine this looking like for us as a church?

PRACTICE PLANTING:

As our series comes to a close, consider who you’d like to invite to a meal to share your harvest with. Thinking of both the person and a recipe they might enjoy! Harvest in a way that helps it thrive, cut the main stem right above the node, about a quarter inch above the leaf buds. This will help your basil continue to grow, while also creating a meal to share.

PRAYER:

Gracious God, creator of all, you have reconciled the world to yourself in Jesus Christ. Thank you for making us new creations and inviting us to share this with others. Help us to see and cultivate this reconciliation in our relationships with you, our neighbor, our fellow creatures, and with the earth. In Jesus’ name, Amen.



FAMILY GUIDE

God invites people of all stages of life to participate in His work of making all things new! In addition to the other weekly devotionals, these are child and family friendly week-by-week guides to go deeper in our love of creation and the Creator. Each week includes a theme, Scripture, “table talk,” and family activity. Enjoy!

► Week 1: Healthy things grow and God calls them “GOOD!”

Read Genesis 1:1-12

TABLE TALK

1. What helps me grow?
2. What is good in our family?

FAMILY ACTIVITY

Place your Sweet Basil plant with good access to sunlight and where you will regularly see it. Keep soil moist by adding a little water every 2-3 days. Put something underneath the pot to collect water that drains out. Let every time you see this little sprout be a reminder that God spoke “It is good” over creation.

► Week 2: There is hope because God repairs broken things

Read Genesis 4:9-16

TABLE TALK

1. Sometimes things get broken in our relationships. Talk about how, as a family, you work toward repairing hurt feelings or hard moments together.
2. Is there a relationship that you want to work on (at school, in the neighborhood, in the family)?

FAMILY ACTIVITY

As a family, go to a neighborhood park or simply walk down your street and safely pick up trash. On your walk, brainstorm ways that you can practice repairing God’s creation.

(Wear gloves and don’t pick up sharp objects!)

► Week 3: Gratitude for God as our Creator

Read Colossians 1:13-20

TABLE TALK

1. As a family, talk about the ways that God is a good Creator in our lives.
2. What is one thing that God has done for you/us today that we want to say “thank you” for?

FAMILY ACTIVITY

As you walk/drive through your neighborhood, have your family reflect on five things that you are thankful for about your community, your local parks, or places you enjoy as a family.

► Week 4: We can see God’s love through creation

Read Psalm 19:1-6

TABLE TALK

1. When have you been in nature and witnessed God’s glory through His creation? (Watching a sunset, seeing stars, going to the ocean, going to the zoo?)
2. Is there something in nature you haven’t seen yet that you think would “declare the greatness of the Lord?” Set a goal as a family to go and see a place of natural beauty (or watch a nature documentary together).





Bethany Community Church

8023 Green Lake Dr N, Seattle, WA 98103
(206) 524-9000 | churchbcc.org