

OPENING HYMN

“All Creatures Worship God, Most High” (ELW 835)

OPENING PRAYER

Stir up your power, O God, and save your good creation. ... Pour out over the earth justice that rolls down like water to nourish the life of the world. Preserve the health of your beloved creation. ... Strengthen those who serve and protect the garden of this earth. Restore the choir of your creatures and let us sing for joy. Gather us at your river, under the tree of life. Send forth your Spirit and renew the face of the earth; in the name of the one who from a wounded tree birthed a new creation, Jesus our redeemer. Amen. (*All Creation Sings*, p. 47)

FOCUS VERSE

“Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?” (Matthew 6:26)

MATERIALS NEEDED

- Bibles (NRSV)
- *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (ELW)

Jesus and nature: Teachers of faith

Session three

Creatures

BY SARA OLSON-SMITH

INTRODUCTION

Several years ago, I took my children to our small local zoo. I wore my infant son wrapped close to my chest. My 3-year-old daughter skipped with joy. At one exhibit, we watched an exhausted meerkat mother nurse her pups. “She’s just like you, Mama!” my daughter exclaimed. “She’s feeding her babies just like you do!” I remember feeling solidarity with that meerkat mama in her exhaustion, as well as a sense of wonder for how our bodies nourished our little ones. As we watched the meerkats eat and play, my daughter and I talked about how God made us mammals, too.

At the end of *Manna and Mercy* (available through Augsburg Fortress: augsburgfortress.org), pastor and cartoonist Daniel Erlander offers a hand-drawn vision of that great someday when God’s reign will finally be fully known. Christ is at the center of this image of a diverse community of people, young and old, surrounded by trees, stars and the sun. And that’s not all: Erlander includes just as many creatures as humans! We see a lion and birds, a turtle and some fish, two little prairie dogs and a slug.

This vision of uniting everything in Christ is what Paul talks about in Ephesians 1 :

“God has made known to us the mystery of [God’s] will, according to [God’s] good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, *to gather up all things in him, things in*

heaven and things on earth” (vv. 9-10).

The way we live in the present is shaped by our vision for the future. By first imagining a future in which all creation and all creatures live in unity, we can begin to act and think in ways that help this vision of unity become a reality now.

This third and final session explores Jesus’ teachings and interactions with creatures. We will notice our solidarity and celebrate our kinship with other animals God has made. We will also claim our responsibility to care for them and for one another.

Share aloud or reflect:

1. Describe a moment of kinship you have had with another creature. What happened? How did it change you?

A MAMMAL BORN AMONG MAMMALS

📖 **Read:** Luke 2:1-7

Jesus began his life in the company of creatures. Despite countless depictions in children’s books and Christmas pageants, we don’t actually have any biblical testimony of barnyard creatures at the nativity (or lobsters, for anyone familiar with the movie “Love, Actually”). But we do know there was a manger or a feeding trough, so there would certainly have been animals to eat from it.

Most Palestinian homes at the time were simple. While some might have a separate sleeping area, typical homes had one large common area for cooking, eating and gathering. Families often brought their precious livestock in for the night, for warmth and protection. The manger would be there in that space, where animals and people rested safely together.

From that one line, “she ... laid him in a manger” (v. 7), we understand that the Savior of this world was not born into a palace with a golden crib or

surrounded by wealthy and powerful people. Jesus was born among poor peasant people, and at least a few animals. Jesus’ beginning was humble, creaturely. He was a mammal, born among mammals.

Share aloud or reflect:

2. How does the company and setting of Jesus’ birth shape your understanding of God and how we relate to others? What does it mean that Jesus, God incarnate, was born a mammal?

THE LORD NEEDS THEM

📖 **Read:** Matthew 21:1-9

The first time we hear that Jesus needs something is when he enters Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. If anyone asks about taking the donkey or colt, Jesus tells his friends, “just say this, ‘the Lord needs them’” (v. 3).


I once asked a friend which character in the Bible she most aspired to be. Without hesitating, she replied, “The donkey.” Like the donkey, she wanted to help carry Jesus and his message into the world.

Whether it was specifically a donkey or a colt that Jesus rode (the four gospel writers, as well as Isaiah and Zechariah, each tell or prophesy this detail differently), this story has something to teach us. By bringing both donkey and foal for this important task, Jesus chooses a way of compassion, even dignity for the animal. He doesn’t separate that donkey from her child. Jesus needs a donkey to ride—but he doesn’t want to leave the foal behind without its mother. Despite his need, Jesus does not sacrifice or force harm upon the animal.

Share aloud or reflect:

3. What need do you have for animals? How might you still meet that need while treating them with dignity or compassion?
4. (optional) Name one animal from scripture, and a trait it has that you admire.

WHIRLWIND OF HUMILITY

 **Read:** Job 38:1–7; 39:1–4, 26–30

Share aloud or reflect:

5. What does this passage tell you about God? Humans? Creation?

The poetic whimsy found in Job 38 and 39 has a purpose. It's there not just because it was written before telescopes or scientific explanations of the parenting habits of birds. Remember that this is not a scientific, biographical or historical text. It is a teaching story that explores faith in the midst of suffering and looks at humanity's relationship with God.

Speaking to Job out of a whirlwind, God pulls him (and us) out of the center of the universe where we like to place ourselves. With wonderful, playful poetry, our anthropocentric view of the world is shattered. God reminds Job who is God and who is not, basically saying: "Where were you when I created the world? ...Have you commanded the morning since your days began?"

We, too, need to hear these words. We tend to place ourselves—our consumption, comfort and control—at the center of things. As theologian Bill McKibben writes in *The Comforting Whirlwind: God, Job, and the Scale of Creation*, "Our culture is a natural extension, magnified a thousand times, of

the culture that Job and his friends inhabited; it revolves entirely around us, leaving little room for anything else" (Cowley, 2005, p. 38).

Like a whirlwind, God's voice lifts us away from the center and lovingly sets us on the periphery, where we are creatures among God's other creations. This shift of perspective is a spiritual thing, helping us to avoid the idolatry of making anything other than God the center of our lives. This shift also moves us from our own isolated suffering to a place of deeper connection with the created world—a place where we can find healing and comfort. This world contains grief and hurt, yes, but also beauty, with a sun that rises every day, leaping horses and soaring hawks. Shifting ourselves away from the center also changes our behavior, enabling us to boldly act for the healing of this dying planet.

Share aloud or reflect:

6. What experiences have pushed you to the periphery? Has there been a time when God (perhaps speaking like a whirlwind) lovingly put you in a healthy place?

THE JOY OF THIS CREATED WORLD

McKibben emphasizes how these verses from Job encourage humility and the necessary work we humans must do to prevent climate catastrophe. Yet he also writes that God's voice "calls us, overwhelmingly, to joy. To immersion in the fantastic beauty and drama all around us. It does not call us to think, to categorize, to analyze, to evaluate. It calls us to be" (*The Comforting Whirlwind*, p. 40).

The whimsical, playful images in the book of Job are the exact opposite of what we might expect when reading about a man who lost everything. Job contains not only sorrow, but an invitation to laugh and delight in the world God has made. In this world, a mountain goat gives birth with God as her

midwife, and an ostrich's wings flap wildly and foolishly. God speaks about the world God made with such pleasure and pride—the way someone might show off pictures of their grandchildren's beautiful finger paintings. Biblical scholar Abigail Pelham writes that God is showing Job “a world different from anything he could have conceived: terrible in its non-anthropocentricity, but, nevertheless, wildly beautiful and madly loved” (*Contested Creations in the Book of Job: The-World-as-It-Ought-and-Ought-Not-to-Be*, Brill, 2012, p. 186).

Share aloud or reflect:

7. What in creation delights you, makes you laugh or reminds you that we are all “madly loved”?

CONSIDER THE BIRDS

📖 **Read:** Matthew 6:25–33

Jesus seldom preaches inside. He spends most of his days teaching outside, sitting on rocks and soil, surrounded by flowers, plants and animals. Jesus is outdoors when he gives the Sermon on the Mount, compassionately addressing very human things: our worry, our preoccupation, our self-absorption, our tendency to be stuck.

I like to imagine that as Jesus looks out at worried folks he loves, he also sees a bird soaring gracefully overhead because he says to these preoccupied people, “Look at the birds. ... Consider the lilies.” (vv. 26, 28).

As any birdwatcher or ornithologist can attest, birds do not live a life of ease. To migrate, they fly thousands of miles. To build a nest, they carry twigs bigger than their bodies. Most don't live beyond their first year. This is not about sitting back or relaxing. It's about not fretting. Birds do not hoard or consume beyond their needs. They are unfettered.

Yet this is about more than seeing birds as examples of living free from anxiety. I believe Jesus is also being literal here. As in: Stop. Go outside. Watch the sparrows. Notice the cardinal. Listen for the loon. Live in awe at this world God has made. Pay attention. Be present. Look at the thousands of wonders and *consider* the immense beauty surrounding you!

In his poem “Peace of the Wild Things,” Wendell Berry writes about times of deep despair when he cannot sleep for worry about what will become of this world in which his children live. He writes: “I go and lie down where the wood drake / rests in his beauty on the water, / and the great heron feeds. / I come into the peace of wild things.” (You can listen to the poet read his entire poem here: <https://onbeing.org/poetry/the-peace-of-wild-things/>)

Apparently, the antidote to worry is awe. When we are preoccupied by anxiety or despair, Jesus tells us to go and watch the birds. We may observe ravens resting or a great heron feeding and find God's peace. This is even—or perhaps, especially—true when we are caught up in concern for the planet's future and the very real climate crisis that already impacts our communities. But being stuck in despair does nothing to benefit those who depend on our action. Wonder frees us from the knots of anxiety that bind us up. Pay attention to the birds. Stop, look and be unfettered.

Share aloud or reflect:

8. Where are the places you find peace? When has paying attention to birds, flowers or any of God's creatures been a blessing to you?
9. What do you do when you are caught by anxiety over the future of the planet?

POWERFUL RESPONSIBILITY

After inviting us to become birdwatchers, Jesus says, “Are you not of more value than those birds?” He also says, “So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows” (Matthew 10:31). This reference to humanity’s exalted value can be found in the Psalms, in words that have even been left on the moon: “Yet you have made [humans] a little lower than God, and . . . have given them dominion over all the works of your hands” (Psalm 8:5-6). Yet this wording has also been used to justify centuries of misuse and abuse of creation. Because we are more valuable than birds, the thinking goes, we can dominate and devour the planet.

Within Christianity, there are two competing narratives of our relationship and role in creation. One narrative holds that we are above animals and creation. The other insists that we are just one creature among creatures. Perhaps they are two sides of the same coin. Both invite us into deep relationship with and among God’s creatures. Both recognize our responsibility to care for all creatures. Both assume we have the power to make things right, to be good stewards.

Debbie Blue, author of *Consider the Birds: A Provocative Guide to Birds of the Bible*, emphasizes that the key point here is love. “If God in Job seemed a little put off by some human tendency to self-importance, here Jesus wants to emphasize that God is attentive to us,” she writes. “It’s hard getting things across to us sometimes, and mostly Jesus just wants us to know that we are loved and that we don’t have to be afraid. And he hopes, knowing that, we can stop being so narcissistic and selfish—we’ll be freer to love and care and be faithful like God is” (Abingdon, 2013, pp. 127-128).

Indeed, Jesus speaks these words while instructing his followers in the near-impossible undertaking of loving our enemies, being salt and light, striving for the reign of God. Jesus reminds us of how precious we all are, helping us to overcome fear, worry

or assumed helplessness. Thinking that we can do nothing is also a barrier to God’s work. As Cynthia Moe-Lobeda, author of *Resisting Structural Evil: Love as Ecological-Economic Vocation*, writes: “Assumed powerlessness in the face of systemic evil is a fundamental problem of contemporary United States society... a society rich with compassionate and well-intentioned people who, nevertheless, live in ways that spell death for many of Earth’s most impoverished human beings and for the planetary web of life” (Fortress Press, 2013, p. 4).

As Jesus’ words remind us, it’s not about hierarchies or domination, but that together, we have the resources, vision and power to do God’s work. When we feel powerless to change things, or afraid that the cost seems too much, we can draw strength from knowing we are of deep value to God, utterly loved and part of the family of God.

Share aloud or reflect:

10. Do you see humanity as kindred alongside God’s creatures? As having a special place of responsibility and power? How does your understanding shape how you live?

HENS AND FOXES

📖 **Read:** Luke 13:31–35

The domestication of chickens is thought to have happened more than 10,000 years ago. In first-century Palestine, chickens were a good source of food—both eggs and meat. And foxes, like many predators, especially when their habitat and food sources are depleted, will find a meal wherever they can, even inside a chicken coop.

Herod, a puppet ruler for the Roman Empire, uses his wealth and power to gain more of both for himself, and to further oppress the Jewish people

under Rome's rule. Because he is a cruel predator of God's people, it makes sense for Jesus to call him a fox.

But the surprise comes when Jesus says, "How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings" (v. 34). We'd expect him to say, "How I wish I was a hunter, who would lay snare to destroy that villain." Or: "How I wish I was an eagle with talons to seize him." But no, Jesus wishes he was a hen, so he could gather his people under his wings, to hold them close.

Jesus is so thoroughly consistent. He says this, on his way to the cross, knowing his own vulnerability and the death that awaits him. At Golgotha, Jesus will spread out his arms to gather the whole world in his saving death.

But we do not seem to be entirely comfortable with the image of Jesus, our Holy Hen. Think about it: We have countless Good Shepherd Lutheran Churches, but not a single Church of the Holy Hen. Maybe it's because hens are common. They are also female. And vulnerable. Yet when faced with the predatory force of an empire, Jesus chooses to be a hen—one with powerful, self-giving love, vulnerability and compassion.

We can follow Jesus by acting in hen-like ways. We can act not through domination or battle, shame or accusation, but by drawing as many people as we can into Jesus' holy work. When the air is poisoned, it's not a blue or red problem, but a problem for all of us who have lungs. When the sea level rises, it is up to all of us to work together to solve this. When poor communities and people of color suffer disproportionately from the devastations of our changing climate, we as people of faith must respond together in mutual care.

Christian communities are uniquely positioned to gather people together. We get to be people who open ourselves to each other. We know what it means to find common ground, think of creative

solutions, and hold onto bold hope for the care of the planet and each other. Even though I'm tempted to channel my mama-bear anger and fierceness to confront the things that attack my (and all our) children, Jesus invites us to channel our inner mama-hen tenderness, creativity and self-giving to do the same.

Share aloud or reflect:

- 11.** How is Jesus a Holy Hen? How does this image expand your thinking about Jesus and his ministry?
- 12.** What do you lament over? Where do you want to be held lovingly in Jesus' wings?
- 13.** In what ways can you help gather people together to do Jesus' work? How might vulnerability and hen-like living help?

SISTER SPARROW AND BROTHER WOLF

For my next-door neighbors, the statue of St. Francis of Assisi in their yard is not just a lawn decoration. Their faithful family has the happiest dogs, an affection for songbirds, a deep knowledge of trees and hostas, and enormous grace for their neighbors, whose weeds and children often end up in their yard. They have taught me the wonder of embracing the fullness of Christ's incarnation and solidarity with creation.

St. Francis lived with a deep reverence for this world. Having given away his wealth and possessions, he lived close to nature and would regularly talk to animals. He'd call them brother and sister, befriending bird and wolf alike. Author and Franciscan sister Ilia Delio writes: "The intimate link between creation and Incarnation revealed to Francis that the whole of creation is the place to encounter God. As his eyes opened to the holiness of creation, he came to see that there is nothing

trivial or worthless. Rather, all created things point beyond” (*A Franciscan View of Creation: Learning to Live in a Sacramental World*, Franciscan Institute Publications, 2003).

When we profess the incarnation, we are declaring that God became human. We are saying that God in Christ chose to live among us, to save us and to show in his very being the value of our bodies, this world, creation and created ones—whether two- or four-legged, furry, scaled or finned.

Jesus’ teachings move us away from a hierarchical, anthropocentric view of ourselves in the world into a deeper solidarity with our siblings in the created world: brother wolf, sister sparrow, mother spider, papa toad. With this understanding, we can live into our responsibility and purpose. With renewed hope, we can work together with God to build that great and beautiful future fulfillment when everything in heaven and on earth will be united.

DREAM AND SCHEME

Take some time to think about how you and your faith community can live out the learnings from this study in your life together. Maybe you can plan an afternoon birdwatching or volunteering at an animal shelter. One big thing we can do for the planet is to eat less meat. Consider sharing a meatless potluck or “meatless Mondays.” To care for our sibling creatures, you could also find and support local sources of meat, eggs and other food.

Although Jesus once said, “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head” (Matthew 8:20), habitats are being destroyed so swiftly that these words are no longer true. Foxes and birds have joined Jesus in being without places to rest. To help, we can support habitat protection and regrowth locally and around the world, particularly throughout Central and South America, Africa and Asia—and our ocean waters. We can do much when we work together for the sake of our sibling creatures.

CLOSING PRAYER

Pray for the needs and joys of your circle. Give thanks to God for the animals and creatures that bless your life. Name aloud pets you love, birds you see and creatures in far corners of the world that inspire you. And if you are so moved, call them your siblings. 🌿

GET READY FOR WINTER/SPRING BIBLE STUDY!

The Ten Commandments

by the Rev. Christa von Zychlin

Join *Gather* magazine and revive your soul in 2023 with a four-session study of the 10 Commandments. Author Christa von Zychlin, an ELCA pastor, will help us see how these commandments are more than they may appear at first glance.

January 2023

Session one

Dancing the Decalogue

Commandments 1 & 2

February 2023

Session two

Rhythms and respect

Commandments 3 & 4

March 2023

Session three

Sanctity of life and love

Commandments 5 & 6

April 2023

Session four

Guardrails for love of God and neighbor

Commandments 7, 8, 9 & 10

DISCOVER HOW GOD CAN USE YOU IN HIS GRAND STORY



The lineage of Jesus is full of surprising people, but perhaps none more than the five women in Matthew 1. *Finding Your Place in God's Story* reveals how each of these women is just like us: ordinary, tainted by sin, yet used to change the world.

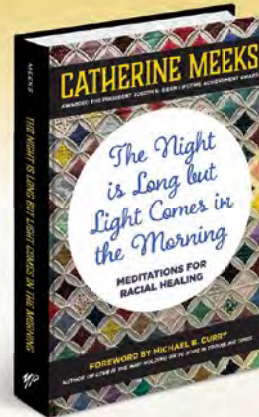
With **Teresa Swanstrom Anderson's** trademark warmth and accessibility, this Get Wisdom study equips women to participate more fully in the story of God.

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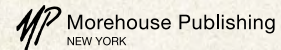
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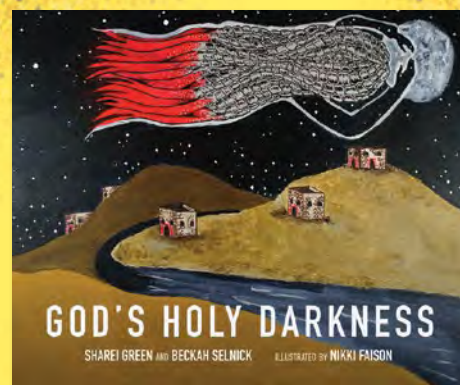
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beaming  books

Jesus and nature: Teachers of faith

Session three Creatures

BY SARA OLSON-SMITH

OVERVIEW

In this session, Jesus turns our attention to birds, compares himself to a hen and honors the value of a sparrow. We will nest ourselves alongside birds and mammals, celebrating the gift of our creatureliness. After considering creatures at the nativity and the donkey(s) at Palm Sunday, we'll jump back to the book of Job, where God describes creation and our place in the world. Then we'll listen to Jesus encouraging us to look at the birds and claim our own value and responsibility. The study ends with Jesus, our Holy Hen, gathering us up in wings of love.

Session goals:

- Continue to read Scripture in a way that considers the environment and creatures surrounding Jesus, which shaped his teaching.
- Shift from an anthropocentric, dominant view of humanity to one of solidarity, kinship and responsibility with other creatures.
- Delight and wonder in creation and the creatures God has made.
- Find renewed motivation to work for the care and protection of God's creation and our kindred creatures.

ON SAVING WHAT WE LOVE

Larry Rasmussen, a Lutheran environmental ethicist, once said that we will not save what we do not love. The Scriptures we read together make it

clear that God loves this world (all of it, not just the human parts) and invites us to love it too. Jesus' invitation to consider the birds nudges us to care for the amazing planet and beloved creatures God has made—just as God does. It makes a difference.

As Robin Wall Kimmerer writes in *Braiding Sweetgrass*, “Knowing that you love the earth changes you, activates you to defend and protect and celebrate. But when you feel that the earth loves you in return, that feeling transforms the relationship from a one-way street into a sacred bond.” I have felt this bond among aspen trees in southern Colorado, with the call of loons in Minnesota, while watching giraffe run awkwardly across the red dirt of East Africa.

Some participants may question why this study does not spend a lot of time on the devastations of climate change, such as island communities swallowed by the sea, massive deforestation and the decline of honeybees. The truths of our environmental crisis are all around us. This study focuses on another challenge: finding hope and vision to do something about our environmental crisis.

The writers of Scripture could not have imagined the challenges we now face, but they knew something about fear and doubt, selfishness and greed, and idolatry. This Bible study aims to renew participants' courage, offer hope and a clear vision, and reorient our identity as creatures made by God—motivating us not only to act, but to gain the joy, courage and community we will need as we go. You can emphasize to participants that when we study Jesus' teachings, we grow in relationship to God and one another. “One another” actually extends beyond our human community, which brings us to understand even more about the love of God in Christ for us and this world.

God calls us to deeply, fiercely love this world and its trees, soil, birds and other creatures. When we love something, we—like a mama bear or mother hen—are moved to save it. Jesus knew this.

USING YOUR TIME WELL

Not enough time to do the whole study? Here are suggestions for shorter study times.

SHORT STUDY (30 MINUTES)

1. Read or share the “Introduction”
2. Read and discuss: “Whirlwind of humility”
3. Read and discuss: “Consider the birds” and “Powerful responsibility”
4. Skip to the end: “Sister Sparrow and Brother Wolf,” “Dream and scheme,” and “Closing prayer”

A LITTLE LONGER (45-60 MINUTES)

Follow steps 1-4, as above, but after step 3, add “Hens and foxes”

EVEN LONGER (60-90 MINUTES)

Follow steps 1-4, as above, but after step 1, add: “A mammal born among mammals” and “The Lord needs them”

Note: The full study could take as much as two hours, but you might opt to keep it shorter simply to add a creature-focused activity such as taking your dog for a walk or attending a city zoning meeting to protect the stream in your town. Later, you might read the skipped sections on your own, perhaps near a window where you can watch the birds.

SOME THOUGHTS FOR LEADERS

Beginning: Take time for participants to connect or reconnect. For introductions, invite people to share their name and answer question #1, about a time they felt a kinship with an animal.

Shifting our thinking: The fact that we are mammals didn’t really mean anything to me, until it suddenly changed everything. In seminary, I took a New Testament class with Dr. David Rhoads, who described waking up in the middle of the night and realizing, “I am a mammal!” This epiphany changed his life, he said, revealing how disconnected he was

from God’s creation and allowing him to invest in a new relationship with the natural world.

How does this disconnect show up in the lives of your group members? Do you find yourself going from your house to the garage to the car to an office or another building and back again? Do you remove food from plastic containers or wrapping, and eat it with plastic utensils? Do you subconsciously think of yourself as a brain with clothes on, or a heart that can text? The thing is, we are mammals. We breathe what trees exhale. We have hair on our bodies. We carry our babies in our bellies. We feel the warmth of sunlight and smell the scent of lilacs. We eat vegetables, fish and meat. We share DNA with countless other creatures on this planet. Like lizards, we have a heartbeat. Like fish, we have muscles. Like spiders, we have eyes (far fewer eyes and legs, thankfully). And we depend on these other creatures for our very lives. We are bound up together.

DREAM AND SCHEME

Acting boldly on our faith keeps us from despair, pulling us into the current of God’s persistent love for us and the world. God’s love, writes Cynthia Moe-Lobeda in *Resisting Structural Evil*, is “intimately personal—for every one of us without exception, embracing our very being—and expanding vastly beyond the person to envelop creation as a whole. ...It is luring us and the entire creation toward a world in which justice and compassion are lived in their fullness by all.”

While Jesus and his friends did not have to be convinced of their dependence on nature, sometimes we do. Thankfully, Jesus’ teachings can remind us of our place in the order of things. 🌿