

OPENING HYMN

“God of Tempest, God of Whirlwind”
(ELW 400)

OPENING PRAYER

Merciful God, when the storms rage and threaten to overtake us, awaken our faith to know the power of your peace. Deliver us from our fear and ease our anxiety. Help us to endure the time of uncertainty and give us strength to face the challenges ahead. Give us the assurance of your presence even in this time so that we can cling to your promise of hope and life shown to us through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen. (ELW: *Occasional Services for the Assembly*, p. 394)

FOCUS VERSES

“But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.”
(Matthew 5:44–45)

MATERIALS NEEDED

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

CLOSING PRAYER

End with prayer with and for the people in your circle. Consider offering a popcorn kind of prayer, where you offer a petition and other participants add in brief answers, much like the sound of popping corn.)

Scripture and nature: Teachers of faith

Session one

Weather

BY SARA OLSON-SMITH

INTRODUCTION

Here in Iowa, countless conversations begin by talking about the weather. It’s a little ridiculous that we spend so much time on the topic since most of us are not meteorologists. We could certainly talk about more important things like our families, books we’ve read and our dreams. But we often default to the easiest topic: what it’s like outside.

One friend of mine has a personal policy of avoiding weather talk. He sees it as a crutch—a way to avoid talking about the important things in our lives. But I don’t see it that way. Weather can be a conversational welcome mat—one that opens us up to deeper things. It’s a good starting point. If two people are in the same vicinity, the weather is one thing they have in common.

No matter who we are, where we come from or what work we do, the sun shines on all of us, and on overcast days cold, gray clouds blanket all of us. While what happens to us due to the weather may vary, our shared experience of rain, heat and cold names the truth of our common humanity: We live together in bodies, in a climate, on a shared planet.

Our four-part “Scripture and nature” Bible study will begin with talk about the weather. This month’s Bible stories carry us into deeper conversations about God, how we love our neighbors and the ways in which we follow Jesus.

Share aloud or reflect:

1. Invite people to briefly share a type of weather and an emotion that this kind of weather may cause them to feel. (For example: “I feel delight when it snows.” “I am terrified by hurricanes.” “I feel relief when it rains on our fields after a long, dry spell.”)

GOD, MAKER OF WEATHER

📖 **Read: Psalm 147**

Share aloud or reflect:

2. What does God do in Psalm 147? What does this tell us about God and God’s relationship with creation?

In this psalm about God’s work in creation, we don’t see a detached God. This is not a depiction of God creating the world, then sitting down on a cozy, heavenly couch with a bowl of angel-crafted, artisanal popcorn to watch at a distance. This is a psalm about God’s continued work through the weather. Rain comes to make grass grow on the hills, giving animals food to eat. God, who is powerful, sends hail like crumbs. God makes wind blow and waters flow. And snow falls, even in the Holy Land, especially in the higher elevations which get snow every winter. The psalmist reminds us of a central theme in scripture: God is God, and we are not. We sing: “Great is the Lord, and abundant in power. God’s understanding is beyond measure.” This psalm points to God’s great genius in creating such brilliant, complex systems. The created world is full of living beings who are intricately connected, who are dependent on each other for their flourishing.

God is the one who fills the world with wheat, the one who makes it possible to have snow. We are

the ones who sometimes forget that we are part of God’s elaborately woven web of creation, who begin to act as if we are the Weaver. Yet God persists in the act of weaving, even when our collective human actions disrupt, disturb and shatter creation’s webs and systems.

Share aloud or reflect:

3. What parts of creation do you depend on? What parts of creation depend on you?
4. After this study session, make time to go outside or watch your local environment from a window. Compose a short psalm of praise for the intricate web of creation you see and experience in your own zip code. What critters, vegetation or other things would you include? How would you praise God for the weather?

GOD MAKES THE SUN RISE ON US ALL

📖 **Read: Matthew 5:43–48**

Have you ever noticed how many cartoons depict someone who is sad or lonely as walking around with their own personal storm cloud, while everyone else experiences blue skies and bright sunshine? Sometimes we also think about weather in those terms—as if somehow, the weather we experience is either a blessing or a curse, sent because of our own (or others’) sinfulness. However, Jesus makes it clear that this is not how God works. God doesn’t send weather as punishment; in the way a judge might issue a lengthy jail sentence. When it rains, it rains on both the good and the bad.

Unfortunately, some Christians overlook this text and falsely use the realities of weather and natural disasters to perpetuate narrow thinking or claims to power. Leaders of Christian fundamentalist

movements have often played this moral blame game when it comes to weather. One of the most notorious examples occurred in 2005, when popular televangelist Pat Robertson said that Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans because God was angry at the United States for high abortion rates—a claim that was both abusive and false.

But Jesus makes it clear that God doesn't send tornadoes as discipline. Throughout scripture we read that our God wants life for us and for this world, and not destruction. Not only that, but the one-time God did use weather as punishment, God seemed to regret it, and placed that rainbow in the sky to promise it would never happen again.

Jesus speaks these words during the Sermon on the Mount, as he teaches his followers to love their enemies and to do good to those who hate them. It's like Jesus is saying, "look at God. Does God go around throwing lightning at the people who hurt people in God's name? No. God shines the sun on the faithful AND those who manipulate scripture for their own power." If God can send life-giving rain to everyone, even God's enemies, surely some kindness from us to those with whom we disagree is not too much to ask.

Share aloud or reflect:

5. Are there times when you've thought of weather as a blessing or punishment? What did this teach you about yourself? Or God?

CONSEQUENCES FOR SIN

📖 **Read:** Deuteronomy 11:8–21

6. What does this say about God? How does this contradict or support the words we just read from Jesus?

These words from Deuteronomy seem in stark

conflict with Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. Yet similar words are found throughout scripture. As the people of Israel step into a new life in the promised land, Moses reminds them that there will be consequences to their behaviors. If they are faithful, there will be rain, food and flourishing. But if they turn away from God, the heavens will be shut up, causing the kind of drought that kills humans and animals.

In ancient Egypt, where the agricultural practices depended on irrigation, the enslaved Israelites would have been forced to get water to the fields "by their own feet." This may be a reference to labor-intensive ways of watering crops, such as using one's feet to tamp down dirt at opening and closing of irrigation ditches, to control water channels. The idea that water will simply fall from the sky in the promised land is yet another reason for it to be a place of flourishing and freedom.

As I worked on this study last fall, the fields around my community were bone dry. A storm had just roared through the country of Libya, killing thousands. Weather experts attribute the increase in catastrophic weather and devastating storms to human-caused climate change. As emissions from fossil fuels have warmed the planet, this has caused wet places to get wetted and dry places to get dryer. Increased global temperatures have led to more powerful storms or unlivable heat in many regions. Global warming, some say, could be called global weirding simply because it has made the weather, temperature, rainfall and more just plain weird.

Reading Deuteronomy 11 challenges me to think about how we experience the consequences of our action and our inaction—our turning away from God and God's people. Despite warnings from scientists and the communities that have been the first to experience the devastating reality of our changing climate, those of us in the U.S. and other wealthy countries around the world have chosen our wealth, economic needs, comfort and power over the hard, but faithful choice to decrease our emissions and

shift the planet's trajectory. In doing so, we have turned away from God and from our neighbor. We have failed at "loving the Lord your God and serving [God] with all your heart and with all your soul" (Deuteronomy 11:13).

We are experiencing the consequences of both our action and inaction. These consequences are not God's doing, but our own. Moses' words in Deuteronomy can turn us back toward loving God and loving our neighbor by working together to make small and big choices that help to heal our planet "so that your days and the days of your children may be multiplied in the land" (Deuteronomy 11:21). This reading is a call to repentance, not because God seeks to punish us, but because the consequence of our inaction is the perishing of the human and non-human neighbors we are called to love.

Share aloud or reflect:

7. How has weather become weird in your community or region? Who is most impacted?
8. What do you think repentance (turning back to God) looks like, as you think about weird weather in your community? (Note: Each person may have a different answer, given our gifts, challenges, communities and the realities we face.)

EVEN WIND AND SEA OBEY

📖 **Read:** Mark 4:35–41

While storms have always been unpredictable, those who lived centuries ago knew little of the science of storms. They just knew of their power. Storms at sea were particularly dangerous, chaotic and terrifying. Ancient cultures around the world thought there were powerful, capricious storm gods that required

special prayers and rituals to keep the gods happy and the storms away. Only a deity had the power to control weather.

In Mark 4:35–41, Jesus demonstrates his divinity by bringing peace to raging waves. Seas and storms are the epitome of chaos and destruction. Only God can have power over this chaos. "Who is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?" the people ask of Jesus. Quieting a storm and bringing peace to the turbulent sea is something that is only possible through the power of God.

Jesus' words here are often translated into English as: "Peace, be still." But the Greek words lean more toward something like: "Silent, be muzzled." I don't know about you, but when I face real or imagined storms or worries in my life, or when I face global or personal catastrophes, storms of words rage powerfully through my head or blare in the news or jump out as I scroll down the screen. I hear Jesus speak to these storms too: "Silence! Muzzle yourself, storms of words. Stop."

It's just as Psalm 46 says: "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore, we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea..." (vv. 1–2). Despite the desolation and devastation of natural disasters and political turmoil, God remains present, steady and strong. God, our mighty fortress, does not fail us. God speaks to us through the storm: "Be still, and know that I am God!" (v. 10a).

Looking again at Mark 4, that question from the disciples, "Lord, do you not care that we are perishing?" (v. 38), may well be a call to action for the body of Christ, the hands and feet of Jesus, in the world today. Countless communities, habitats and people are perishing because of rising sea levels from melting polar ice caps, an increase in hurricanes and typhoons, and hotter temperatures. While we might not be able to calm the storm with a word, we can awaken from our slumbers and work collectively for the sake of our neighbors.

Share aloud or reflect:

9. What storms of words or worries do you pray that God would silence? When have you experienced that gift of peace?
10. How can we balance the need to be aware and prepared for storms with claiming space to experience the peace Jesus brings? What might this balance look like for you?

DROUGHT AND GENEROSITY

📖 **Read:** Genesis 45:1–15

Share aloud or reflect:

11. Who do you identify with in this story? How have you been like Joseph? How have you been like his brothers?

This biblical passage comes near the end of the long story of Joseph. To recap: Joseph, one of 11 brothers, is particularly beloved by his dad. Acting out of jealousy, his brothers sell him to people heading to Egypt. Fast forward through many years and chapters of Genesis, and we find that Joseph is now a chief advisor to Egypt's ruler. Joseph, blessed with predictive dreams, sees seven years of future abundance followed by seven years of drought and devastation. Inspired by Joseph's dream, Egypt saves the bounty of its abundant years for the coming dry ones. Not only do they survive, but they also even prosper, selling grain to others who are starving and in need. Joseph's famished family—like many people today who are forced to flee their homes because of weather—leaves hard-hit Canaan and migrates to Egypt.

Based on much of what happens between the brothers and Joseph, it's easy to think that some biblical family values wouldn't be a virtuous aim.

Yet in this story we also hear tenderness, forgiveness, generosity and care. Despite the complicated history, Joseph shares from his abundance and feeds his hungry family.

When storms or droughts hit, often those who are most impacted are vulnerable people with little reserves or savings. Joseph's story invites people of faith to show up and share their abundance. Those of us with enough (or more than enough) are called to be mindful of the many people around the world who face devastating droughts or storms with very little reserves.

In Genesis 45:8, there's a line we don't want to miss: "God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant of the earth... So it was not you who sent me here, but God." This echoes Genesis 50:20, where Joseph tells his brothers, "Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve numerous people, as God is doing today."

God has a way of responding to trouble, human-caused or natural, by making good happen after the bad. Repeatedly, God comes behind tragedy to bring healing and hope to even the worst situations. When others intend something for evil, God is somehow able to make good happen, bring about healing, restore relationships and create community.

Share aloud or reflect:

12. In what ways do you or your congregation act like Joseph to help bring about goodness after catastrophe or devastation? How can you continue or grow these efforts?

THE HOPE OF UNCERTAIN FORECASTS

📖 **Read:** Luke 12:54–56

Many of us start the morning by checking a weather app or listening to a meteorologist give the local

forecast. However, before satellites and radar, people just watched the skies. People had to be more attuned to the natural world for the sake of their livelihoods and safety. Some of us still know what the skies teach, including: “Red sky at night, sailors delight. Red sky in morning, sailors take warning.”

Jesus invites his followers to pay attention to spiritual matters in the same ways we watch the skies for weather. We can read the skies, but we “do not know how to interpret the present time (*kairos*).” The word *kairos* is not about a chronological time, but about the appointed time, when God’s timing is right. Jesus shares this while also reminding his followers about the hard choices of following him. They’ll need to let go of wealth, family connections and anything else that hinders their faithfulness. Jesus seems to be saying, “I am the right time, and it’s now. So don’t let anything get in the way of our work.”

The thing is, we don’t always read the skies correctly. Even meteorologists aren’t always so great at forecasting weather. It’s never easy to discern the realities of what is to come or who we are to be. But there’s good news here: the unknown is just what we need to live in this present time.

Climate and human rights activist Rebecca Solnit writes: “People often talk about the future as if it already exists. There are parameters to what is possible, likely, and all but inevitable, and scientists have done a good job of telling us the probable consequences of what we do in the present, in terms of natural systems. But they hedge their bets because they know the future is what we make of it in the present” (*Not Too Late: Changing the Climate Story from Despair to Possibility*, Haymarket Books, 2023, p. 11).

What will we make of the future? We live in a *kairos* moment—the right time to work together for the sake of our neighbors, the planet, ourselves and future generations. There’s a hope in not knowing that moves us to create a future where all people can thrive. A hope built on the vision of beloved community, care of neighbor, and stewardship of the

resources that God in Christ gives to us.

“...Hope is not optimism,” Solnit adds. “Optimism assumes the best and assumes its inevitability, which leads to passivity, as do the pessimism and cynicism that assume the worst. . . [Hope] means recognizing the uncertainty of the future and making a commitment to try to participate in shaping it.” (*Not Too Late*, p. 5)

Share aloud or reflect:

13. When you “read the skies,” what kind of *kairos* moments do you see happening now? How can hope move you out of passivity into action?

CONCLUSION: TSUNAMI OF LOVE

I remember hearing about a man whose immediate family was killed during the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami that took the lives of nearly 230,000 people in 14 countries. The man didn’t just talk about his grief and trauma from the tragedy. He also spoke of the magnificent outpouring of love, prayers and support he and others experienced. He also wrestled with theological questions about that disaster, wondering: Did God cause it? Allow it? Where was God in it all? Eventually, he came to understand that God didn’t cause the tsunami, but God did bring a tsunami of love. The man was overwhelmed by God’s massive, divine response of generosity, compassion and healing.

From reading scripture, we know that God is more powerful than raging storms. Through the Holy Spirit, that very power of God energizes us. Together, we become a tsunami of love and a tempest of transformation. We can be earthquakes that shake others from complacency. We can let down torrents of compassion, shine sunlit rays of hope, and change this world for the healing of the planet and for the sake of our neighbors, who we are called to love. 🌿

Scripture and nature: Teachers of faith

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Weather

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SESSION GOALS

- Practice a way of reading scripture that pays attention to the environment(s) within which they were first written.
- Recognize the ways we and others are impacted by weather and its increasing weirdness due to human-cause climate change and think about ways we can respond faithfully.
- Notice the ways our lives are interdependent, not only with other people, but also with creation.
- Ground ourselves in the goodness and consistency of God amid the ever-changing world.
- Find renewed hope and courage to move us out of passivity in creative action.

BIBLE STUDY GOALS

Whenever I gather with people around the Bible, I pray for deeper knowledge and connection. Through shared reading, we grow in knowledge and connection with God, ourselves and others. In these studies, particularly, I include among those “others” our non-human companions on this planet.

If you are helping to lead this study, hold onto the goal of deeper connection to God, each other

and this world. Try to avoid getting caught up in the content, politics, or getting to one right answer or lesson. There may be people who disagree, but that is a good thing! Use this time to lean into learning and listening, so that you may find a bridge between various sides and locate places of shared understanding, values or commitments.

This is one reason to make time for the discussion questions that come right after you read the scripture passages together. These questions help people to reflect and share before being influenced by my commentary. Trust your group members (and yourself) to respond thoughtfully and faithfully. My interpretation is just one way to think about these readings. Feel free to go off script a bit, ask questions and lean into curiosities. Make space for conversation and sharing of experiences. Honor the wisdom of your participants as well.

TALKING ABOUT STORMS, CLIMATE CHANGE

I have written this study with the working understanding that climate change is happening and is human caused. If you or others in your circle want to learn more about this or wish to investigate this in depth, here are some helpful links:

- Let’s Talk Climate: Communications Guidance for Faith Leaders: ecoamerica.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/lets-talk-faith-elca.pdf
- The ELCA webpage on the environment www.elca.org/Our-Work/Publicly-Engaged-Church/Advocacy/Environment
- Lutherans Restoring Creation lutheransrestoringcreation.org/
- Katherine Hayhoe’s website and writings www.katharinehayhoe.com/faqs/
- National Geographic’s Explanation about Weather

and the Climate: www.nationalgeographic.com/climate-change/how-to-live-with-it/weather.html

Truth is, I'd much rather have written another study about trees. But unprecedented weather this last year brought desolation and devastation to countless human and non-human lives. In my despair and anxiety, I did what I always do when something feels overwhelming: I turned to scripture and how Bible passages about storms might help us make sense of these days.

The Bible tells us about the many ways God has freed, mended, challenged and blessed this world. But these ancient, biblical stories also teach us to see how God is up to the same saving acts now! It helps me to see how God continues to act and to call us to live differently in the world.

At the end of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, he says that the people who hear his words and act on them are like a wise person who builds their house on the rock. Storms come. Rain falls. Winds blow. But their house remains and does not fall. I intended for this study to help us shore up our foundations, find solid ground on which to live in a time of climate crisis, and weather the many personal struggles and storms that so many of us face.

Even if you don't think that the climate is something we need to be concerned about, I hope this study can open your heart to the ways our neighbors are impacted by the changing climate and to the scriptural call for us to respond. If you are beginning to see that climate change threatens your neighbors and your children, not to mention your investments, I hope these conversations can inspire learning and action. If you are battling your own climate despair, may this study renew your courage to continue working. I am convinced that God's Word and the community of the faithful will provide us with the strong foundation we need to not become overwhelmed by despair or turned in our ourselves in denial.

SHORT STUDY (45 MINUTES)

1. Read or share the "Introduction" and "Talk about weather together."
2. Read and discuss "God makes the sun rise on all of us," "Consequences of sin," "Even wind and sea obey Him," and "Drought and generosity."
3. Focus on questions 4, 6, 7, 8 and 11.
4. Do "Tsunami of love."
5. End with the **closing prayer**.

A LITTLE LONGER (45–60 MINUTES)

Add "In the hope of uncertain forecasts."

LONGER (60–90 MINUTES)

Add in "The maker of weather"

The full Bible study, with enough time for good conversation, could take up to two hours. I know some groups do the full study, but for those who use a shortened version (or if you do not have a group study), try to read these sessions in a contemplative way. Read the scripture verses and reflect on the questions in your journal or in a quiet time of prayer. 🌸