## **OPENING PRAYER-HYMN**

"For the Wholeness of the Earth" (ACS 1067) or "For the Beauty of the Earth" (ELW 879)

#### **MATERIALS NEEDED**

- Bibles (NRSV)
- Hymnals (All Creation Sings, Evangelical Lutheran Worship)
- (optional) paper, pens, markers

# Now let us pray

# Session two

Praying with the body of the Earth

BY LIV LARSON ANDREWS

IGod has planted the gospel all around us, since the beginning of time. Together, the living word of scripture and the living word in the world remind us of God's goodness. Scripture inspires us to regard the natural world as both a sacred space and our neighbor, calling us to be in relationship with the Earth and to notice God's presence in this relationship.

This final session in our two-part study of prayer explores ways we can pray not only for the earth, but with the earth. As we consider dangers to the planet, including climate change, we will pray for specific parts of creation as our sacred neighbors. As we read Scripture, including the glorious vision in Revelation 22 of a restored world and the river of life, can we see the trees and rivers God made as our prayer partners? In our prayers, we step a little closer to that mystical vision.

## PRAYING WITH A PLANET IN PERIL

Sing or play a YouTube version of "For the Wholeness of the Earth" (ACS 1067)

Read: Isaiah 43:2

"When you walk through fire you shall not be burned and the flame shall not consume you."

Where I live in the Inland Northwest—also called the Intermountain West—fire is a continual concern. At one time, fire fears in our region were limited to the summer months when extreme heat and dry grass combine with people camping or using fireworks, leading to perilous results.

Now, fire can strike at almost any time of the year. Smoke from these fires makes the air around us unbreathable. I can say, from experience, that it's not easy to have your children's first day of school postponed because it's too dangerous to play outside.

Climate change-related dread is on the rise. Perhaps it is not fires, but floods or dramatic storms that affect your geography. As with any circumstance that threatens to paralyze us with fear, this very real dread can drive us to pray. Praying for and with our planet helps us remember that we are a part of it—part of the good creation that God is still creating and sustaining in its goodness.

# Read: Daniel 3

## Share aloud or reflect:

1. How does this biblical story make you feel? Do some parts seem improbable or funny or frightening? Do some parts inspire you?

This text has inspired people of faith for thousands of years. An image of the three men praying from the center of the fiercely blazing furnace is painted above the catacomb of Priscilla, a wealthy Christian woman who was buried in second century Rome. There, the story of Daniel 3 evokes resurrectionlife springing up from death. The story is also featured in a 1967 sermon titled, "But If Not," where Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. preaches about the prophetic courage it took for Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego to stand up to King Nebuchadnezzar. My mentor, Dr. Barbara Rossing, points to Daniel 3 as a beacon of hope in an era of climate change, especially for those of us in the fire-prone west, that we can continue to be faithful and praise God, even when our world is literally on fire. But what does it mean to pray in the midst of flames?

#### Share aloud or reflect:

- 2. Have you ever experienced an emergency evacuation due to a weather event, or cared for others who were evacuated?
- 3. How would you pray with or minister to those who have experienced instability due to a climate crisis event?
- 4. Being thrown into the king's furnace may evoke a variety of life experiences in which we feel tossed into something unspeakably horrible and beyond our control. What does prayer sound like in these moments? Is prayer only lament? Could it also include praise?

I wonder who was praying for Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego while they were undergoing these horrifying experiences. I wonder if anyone was praying for the land. I wonder if anyone was praying for the guards who died tending the fire. Whenever we worship together, we pray for others. We name people who are sick or grieving or recovering from surgery. We name people who are lonely, who need aid and who simply ask us to pray for them. If we listened more fully to the land, could we hear its prayer requests? What if we prayed for endangered species by name? What if we gave thanks for the plants and creatures who live near us?

## Share aloud or reflect:

- In small groups, name places and parts
  of creation that you know have suffered
  or need prayer for some reason. For
  example, I pray regularly for the Spokane
  River.
- 6. As a group, name and pray for as many animals in your environment as you can. (If praying outside, pray silently, keeping as still and silent as possible.) Notice all the sounds around you—human and

nonhuman. Feel your own heartbeat. Remember that you are alive and a part of the whole creation. Consider the pulsing life of other living things around you. In just a few words, share your experiences with others around you.

Sometimes I wonder what eventually happened to the huge furnace King Nebuchadnezzar built to kill his disobedient subjects. Did it just sit there, long after the fires had gone out, a scar on the land and an embodied reminder to the people of the king's cruelty? Did the families of those who were killed there treat that site as a memorial or as a still-dangerous grave? What does prayer look like when mourning and grieving are censored?

There are scars on the land around me. As a follower of Jesus, knit together into the web of creation through the life of Christ, I hear the call to regard those painful places where creation is wounded and pray with them. Just this year, a patch of several acres of land near my house burned badly, all because of the careless use of fireworks on July 4. What would it be like to stand on the charred ground and pray for the healing of the earth?

Just a few hours away from where I live is the Hanford nuclear waste site. It's a scar on the planet, not only for the poisonous waste it holds, but also because atomic bombs that laid waste to entire cities were built here. A friend of mine is part of a community choir that performed music of lament inside one of the structures there. Together, they sang out a prayer for the healing of the earth, repenting of war and violence, seeking a future of peace.

# Share aloud or reflect:

7. What are the scarred places on the land around you? How did they become scarred, polluted or damaged? What words would you use to lament our human misuse of creation while praying

for restored health? Would you consider going on a group field trip to pray near one of these sites?

## **PRAYING AMONG THE TREES**

Sing or listen to "Tree of Life and Awesome Mystery" (ELW 334)

# Read: Psalm 1:3

In a poem, Mary Oliver discusses being physically close to trees and feeling a sort of fellowship or communion with them. "I would almost say that they save me, and daily," she writes. Trees are also spoken of throughout scripture, forming a key theme in God's saving story.

## Share aloud or reflect:

8. How have you (or others) made a seemingly irrational investment of time, talent or treasure in a community? Did some of the investment fall on "hard rock" or become "trampled underfoot"? Did some of the investment "pay off" handsomely?

In Evangelical Lutheran Worship, the Psalms section opens with a beautiful drawing of a tree—dazzling and fruitful, with all creation gathered around it in harmony. Isn't it interesting that a tree is used to introduce Psalms, the prayer book of our faith? I believe trees are our partners in prayer. Let's look at a lesser-known story from the book of Judges to consider how praying for and among trees can open us to God's presence.

# Read: Judges 9:7-15

Spoken by the grieving Jotham, this cryptic parable is offered at a moment in Israel's story when a difficult truth must be named. Much like the

parables of Jesus, this parable uses images of nature to communicate truths about how God's people have acted. First an olive tree, then a fig tree, and finally a vine is asked to be the ruler over all the other trees. What a silly idea that one species of tree would dominate all others, "swaying" over them, right? Each kind of tree protests, declaring that becoming a ruler would mean sacrificing the other special gifts that each tree was made to give. These gifts include olive oil, sweet figs and wine. If we also had to rule, we would be too busy, the trees seem to say, to offer such gifts. Then comes bramble. Bramble doesn't decline the offer of becoming a ruler. Rather, bramble makes a threat: If the other trees don't anoint it "in good faith," fire will destroy the cedars of Lebanon.

It's important to note: Cedars are strong, noble and fragrant. To imagine bramble taking down the cedars means something is badly out of rhythm.

# Share aloud or reflect:

9. How do you become aware of things being out of rhythm in your life? What does your body tell you? In what ways do you interact differently with creation when your life is out of balance?

When this parable was given, God's people were in a growth stage-one in which power and authority were changing. They had just been saved by the powerful Gideon, who declined to become their king, saying instead that "the Lord will rule over you" (Judges 8:23). Things remained peaceable until Gideon died. Then Israel sought fortune by worshiping the gods of their neighbors instead of worshiping the Lord. A terrible cascade of violent bloodshed followed, as would-be rulers competed for the throne. Jotham, who survived the bloodbath, used this story to cry out against those practicing the violence. Jotham saw how the people had sacrificed God's good gifts—gifts of the land like oil,

figs and wine—by giving their trust to unworthy leaders who acted like a bramble over them.

Today, trees may not tell us satirical parables, but they do communicate when things are out of balance. Indigenous cultures have understood this for many generations. Biologists are just catching up to noticing the ways trees send messages through soil, water and air, actually telling each other about pests, diseases or other threats. Peter Wohlleben's The Hidden Life of Trees (also published for younger readers as Can You Hear the Trees Talking?) has helped many people encounter and better understand trees and sentient neighbors in creation. "Children were talking with trees for centuries before scientists proved that trees communicate," writes Sy Montgomery, a reviewer of Wohlleben's work. We, like the forests, thrive because of trees, which speak to each other and to us. In so many ways, trees help us get back into balance.

# Share aloud or reflect:

10. Did you talk to trees as a child? Did you stop at a certain age? What could it look like to pray with a tree?

Try this idea: As weather permits, go for a walk in your neighborhood, a local park or along a hiking trail. Choose one tree or a group of trees. Place your forehead to a tree's bark and breathe quietly. What do you smell? Touch the tree. What do you feel? Look directly up and observe the pattern of the branches against the sky, and the interlacing shapes. Give thanks for the beauty and connectedness of creation. Offer the tree your worries and concerns. Listen. Receive the wisdom the tree—part of God's creation—might share with you. Like oil and wine, trees give us gifts all the time.

# Share aloud or reflect:

11. As a group, brainstorm some ways to nurture this experience of

interconnectedness and communication around trees. Have you ever heard God's voice when you were near or among trees?

## **PRAYING ALONG RIVERS**

"Shall We Gather at the River" (ELW 423)

**Read:** John 7:38

"Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water."

Which river have you crossed the most in your lifetime? Ever since my two sons were preschoolers, we have greeted the Spokane River on our way to school in the morning. Our road takes us down a hill, then we say, "Goooood morning, river!" Each fall, the river is low, slow and full of vegetation. By spring, it is high and mighty, raging over waterfalls in the middle of the city.

Our faith is riverine. Or at least, riparian. Riverine and riparian are two biological terms describing river-related ecosystems. Riverine systems contain all the life inside a river: salmon, crawdads, frogs, algae, basalt and sand. Riparian systems comprise the life alongside a river: eagles, otters, garter snakes, dragonflies, trillium, horsetail, pebbles and us—humans. The river is why the city of Spokane, Washington, grew where it did; it was already a sacred gathering ground for several indigenous cultures in the Plateau-Salish region.

Rivers are present throughout the biblical story. Genesis 2 names four rivers as being at the center of the world. The Nile offers up Moses. The Jordan River forms a borderland for Israel. The psalms are filled with images of streams and rivers. The prophets see visions of God's redemption as being like rivers flowing in the desert. In the waters of the Jordan River, Jesus is baptized by John. Revelation 22, the final scene of all things restored in harmony

through Christ, features the river of life at the heart of a shining city. Our biblical story begins and ends with rivers.

Essential for life and evocative of renewal, journey and passage, rivers can teach us about prayer. To paraphrase a line from Martin Luther's Flood Prayer, "At the river your Son was baptized by John and anointed with the Holy Spirit."

Shall we gather at the river? the hymn asks. We do and we will, to pray.

**Read:** 2 Kings 5:1-14

In 2 Kings 5, an act of radical healing takes place... you guessed it!...in a river. After quite a lot of imperial bluster and displays of pride, one man in need of healing comes down to the shore of one river. Seven simple splashes result in a lifetime of restoration. In verse 13, the question asked by this man's servants is one for all of us: If your faith asked something difficult of you, would you not do it? How much more when the act is so simple, like, "Wash, and be clean"?

# Share aloud or reflect:

12. Can you think of a time when you or someone close to you was ready to undertake a challenge for the sake of betterment or healing, but then bypassed a simpler solution that would have helped?

Naaman, a person of high status, seems to fear a loss of dignity or respect. Why, someone like him ought to at least be greeted by the actual prophet, not a mere messenger (v. 11). Plus, this whole endeavor began based on the advice of a slave girl. Relationships of power are being played with here, and that's risky, especially if you believe that your self-worth is tied to how powerful you are.

Share aloud or reflect:

13. How does pride get in the way of honest prayer? Does power distort relationships in faith communities, making it a challenge to pray for each other?

I find it stunning that in this setting, a girl who is both young and enslaved can boldly tell her master—a person with ultimate control over her life—how he can find restoration. You see, healing, especially healing that comes from God, is for everyone. This story is often shared in faith formation contexts to explore baptism and our Lutheran understanding of it. We learn that the Jordan River and its healing gifts are for everyone—not just the folks "from around here" or the folks that supposedly did something to earn it. You don't do anything to earn God's healing. You just get in the water.

Prayer, like faith, is something we can easily overcomplicate. In the end, we find that God's invitation to prayer is like the invitation that comes to Naaman. Simply be willing to do the small thing ... the easy thing ... the thing right in front of you. When done as prayer, it becomes prayer. We find God everywhere: in the sink of dishes, on a walk with a child, in flowering weeds pushing up through concrete, in local rivers.

Sometime, try sitting near a river, creek, stream or another body of water. Watch the water move. Think of something you'd like help letting go of. As you visualize those things, open your hands. You might hold a pebble or branch or flower to represent these things, then place it in the water. Ask God to receive those things, in the way the river receives your pebble. Take a few moments in silence to listen for God's voice. Kindle the prayers in your heart for the people you pray for regularly. Recall places in the world that need protection, healing and peace. Bring your prayers to the river of God's love. If you are near enough, touch the river water, letting it flow through your fingers, before using that hand to make the sign of the cross. Remember your baptism. If you are

there with your group, make this sign for each other.

Read: Revelation 22:1-2

Close your eyes. Listen to the text. What does the tree of life look like? What colors do you notice in the river?

Naaman was healed by putting his body into the water. Here, the river of life sustains the tree of life, each of which is used for the healing of not one person, but all nations. The Greek word for nations, *ethnos*, also means "peoples." Entire groups of people are restored into right relationship with the trees, the river, each other, and the Lamb of God is at the center of it all. Prayer draws us deeply into God's saving presence, into relationship, into reconciliation with creation. Like water, we flow into union with the divine.

Let the words of Revelation 22:17 flow through you like a poem or a song. Let everyone who is thirsty come. Amen.

## **Thirteenth Triennial Convention**

Official notice is hereby given that the Thirteenth Triennial Convention of Women of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America will be held virtually July 13-14, 2026, starting no earlier than 9:00 a.m. Central Time. All are encouraged to visit welca.org for information as details are finalized and published.

Following the convention, all are encouraged to attend the in-person 2026 Women of the ELCA Triennial Gathering "I Am Worthy" in Des Moines, lowa. The Gathering is set to open Thursday, July 16, in the afternoon, and conclude around noon, Sunday, July 19, 2026.

# **Gwendolynn Edwards, Secretary**

Women of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America Churchwide executive board

# Now let us pray

# Session two

Praying with the body of the Earth

BY LIV LARSON ANDREWS

Welcome to the final session of our two-part Bible study on prayer and embodiment, a gift of our Christian tradition. This final session focuses on praying with the body of the Earth. That said, new settings often reveal God's presence and bring new insights. Consider holding your meeting or part of your meeting:

- outdoors (if you live in a geographic area and climate where this is safe, and doing so will not prevent some participants from taking part.)
- indoors, but near a window overlooking nature
- indoors, but participants are invited (before your meeting) to bring along and share a favorite printed or digital image of nature.

If you do choose a new setting, ensure your group will have what they need. This could include: camping chairs and blankets if you do go outdoors, or if you stay indoors, cell phones/cameras/printed photos or art for sharing nature pictures. If you do go outdoors, make sure this is safe (no slippery or icy paths; smooth sidewalks and ramps for walkers and wheelchairs). Consider offering a hot cocoa and hot tea treat after the meeting.

# **NOTES FOR LEADERS**

As a leader, it's important to recognize and respect that people of faith have different perspectives and experiences with prayer. Sometimes prayer involves fraught issues. This is especially the case with public prayers and prayers for healing.

Public prayer concerns: Especially in our present moment of deep political division, gathering to pray for a place harmed by pollution, overuse or other human causes can seem more like a political gesture than a faithful practice. If you choose to embody this important act of faith, be clear with your group members about why you are praying and what you are asking. No political party in the United States has been flawless about the climate. All humans fall short on this. When we pray publicly for the land, the water and the air, we are asking God to heal us as well. Practice answering questions that may come from observers, such as: "What are you doing here?" This can be a powerful way to also share the good news that God cares about the earth and about us.

Concerns around prayers for healing: This can be a difficult subject, as can the frequent public use of the phrase "thoughts and prayers." First, we trust God to hold and keep us always, no matter what happens. And we ask God for help. But sometimes people are not healed in the way we'd hoped, or the desired change doesn't happen the way we'd envisioned. All people of faith live with this tension, and we don't need to ignore it. Consider inviting a hospital or nursing home chaplain to accompany your group and help discuss this challenging but vital topic.

Second, let me share a personal story. In the winter of 2018, my youngest son was two years old and very sick. As it turned out, the sickness was not a virus, but a bowel obstruction. A string-like tissue in his small intestine had wrapped around the bowel, cinching it like a tourniquet. One day after Ash Wednesday, my son needed immediate emergency abdominal surgery to save his life. I'll never forget the pediatric surgeon coming from his home where he'd been sleeping, to operate on my child. Had this incredibly skilled person—the only one in our region with the training to save my son's life—said to me, "Well, my thoughts and prayers are with you," instead of operating, I imagine that I would have grabbed him by the scrubs and put the scalpel in his hand myself.

Of course, it is not a bad thing that we think of and pray for others. That's how we practice our faith. The problem comes when prayer is claimed to be offered, but helpful action isn't taken. When legislators, community leaders or any of us who are specially authorized or skilled to accomplish something that will help others, say "thoughts and prayers" instead of taking clear action, this demeans the act of prayer. Our thinking and our praying should lead us to discernment and action. This is our baptismal calling.

## **ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**

Think about this quote attributed to Maya Angelou: "When we cast our bread upon the waters, we can presume that someone downstream whose face we will never know will benefit from our action, as we who are downstream from another will profit from the grantor's gift."

- Rent or request (via library loan) The Hidden Life of Trees, a film narrated by biologist Peter Wohlleben. Afterwards, ask how prayer may be part of loving the forest. See the trailer here: https://www.youtube.com/ watch?v=k\_xKhHwqeW8
- Listen to "But If Not," a sermon by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., on Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, and any present-day implications. https://www.youtube.com/ watch?v=pOjpaIO2seY
- Follow "American Rivers" on social media for images and stories about the beauty and peril of rivers in the United States. @americanrivers
- Use the Thanksgiving for Baptism prayers (pp. 70-71) or the Creation prayers (p. 47) in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* to pray for rivers and discuss what you notice when you pray near living water. Consider praying these near a river or around the baptismal font.

# **OPTIONAL ACTIVITIES**

 Draw a tree. Visual images of trees can be a blessing for your faith community, calling others to pray. Many of us enjoyed drawing pictures of trees when we were small. Some of

- us still do. Provide paper, markers and colored pencils so participants can sketch and color the trees of Judges 9. Then collect the finished trees to create a forest! Another option:

  Sometimes the visual of a prayer chain looks like a tree. (We used to call them phone trees!) Your group could work together on drawing one large prayer tree. Or, on All Saints Sunday, you could do what I did one year: create a tree banner with the names of all who had died.
- Read a poem that describes our sacred connections to land, sea, sky and each other.
   Two poets who speak of nature and call me to prayer and mediation are Mary Oliver and Langston Hughes. You can do this with hymns as well.

## SHORTENING SUGGESTIONS

Do the study, but skip the hymns. Or read the study ahead of time, then go outside in nature (or meet in an indoor space, overlooking nature) to spend 30-40 minutes sharing observations and reflections on the three sections of Session 2.