

The background is a watercolor-style illustration of a landscape. The top half shows a sky with soft, blended clouds in shades of light blue and white. Below the sky, there are several layers of mountains and hills. The foreground hills are a vibrant green, while the middle ground mountains are a medium blue, and the farthest peaks are a lighter, hazy blue. The overall style is soft and artistic, with visible brushstrokes and color blending.

For the  
**Beauty**  
of the  
**Earth**

A Lenten Devotional

Leah D. Schade



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of the  
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**Dear readers,**

“How often does Jesus make references to nature in his teaching?” That question was asked by a participant in a Bible study I once led. I knew Jesus had made several references to aspects of Creation, but when I began reading through the Gospels, I was surprised just how many times nature is referenced either by Jesus himself (more than 50) or in the accounts about him and his birth, ministry, death, and resurrection (more than 55).

What is undeniable is that both Jesus and the Gospel writers saw Creation in all its aspects as imperative for giving witness to God’s Kingdom and the revelation of Jesus Christ as the Son of God. Jesus was present at the beginning of Creation. He used images from nature to illustrate his teachings. He interacted directly with many aspects of Creation (rivers, lakes, seas, winds), and he sought prayerful refuge in the wilderness, on mountains, and in gardens. Reciprocally, nature gave witness to the personhood and divinity of Jesus from the time of his birth announced in the heavens, to the darkness that enveloped the land at his crucifixion. Earth took Jesus into itself and gave witness to the resurrection with earthquake, sunrise, and the beauty of a garden.

If Creation is this important to Jesus and the Gospel writers, shouldn’t we regard Creation with equal importance? If Jesus heeded Earth’s teachings and learned the lessons of God’s ways from his time spent in nature, shouldn’t we afford Earth and Creation the same status as sacred teacher? Especially as followers of Christ, we must include the voice of Earth in our decisions about how we live, work, build, consume, and minister to others.

As we mark the 50th anniversary of the first Earth Day celebrated in 1970, Christians have an opportunity to reflect on how caring for God’s Creation is connected to our faith. Drawing on the beloved hymn “For the Beauty of the Earth,” each week of this devotional will focus on a different aspect of the splendor of nature, how our spirit can be nurtured by God through Creation, and how we can protect our precious home. As we walk with Jesus along shorelines, through gardens, and among trees, we will learn from the “birds of the air” and “the lilies of the field.” When our Lenten journey takes us into the heart of Earth itself at Jesus’ tomb, we will anticipate the eco-resurrection with eager longing and active hope.

“For the Beauty of the Earth” was written by Follitt Pierpoint of Bath, England, in 1864. The lyrics of this hymn praise Christ for the beautiful world that we inhabit and its wonders both simple and grandiose. The hymn mentions many aspects of existence that evoke gratitude, including the earth and skies, trees and flowers, human love, and the “best gift divine”—Christ Jesus himself. On the next page, you’ll see the lyrics from that hymn. You might consider singing a different verse each day before you read the devotional.

While this joyous hymn is a fitting reminder of all the beauty that surrounds us, it also stands in stark contrast to the ways in which we see the world polluted and suffering from human activity. My hope is that this Lenten devotional will help you listen for the voice of Earth and Earth’s inhabitants through the witness of scripture. Each devotion has either a set of questions to ponder or a spiritual practice to try. As you undertake this journey, may you be moved to take up the task of honoring, preserving, caring for, and learning from our Earth-kin as part of your ongoing ministry.

May God bless our Lenten journey together,

*Leah D. Schade*

# *“For the Beauty of the Earth”*

Lyrics by Folliott Pierpoint (1835 – 1917)

## *Verse One*

For the beauty of the earth,  
for the glory of the skies,  
for the love which from our birth  
over and around us lies.

## Refrain:

Christ, our Lord, to you we raise  
this, our hymn of grateful praise.

## *Verse Two*

For the wonder of each hour  
of the day and of the night,  
hill and vale and tree and flower,  
sun and moon and stars of light. [Refrain]

## *Verse Three*

For the joy of human love,  
brother, sister, parent, child,  
friends on earth, and friends above,  
for all gentle thoughts and mild. [Refrain]

## *Verse Four*

For yourself, best gift divine,  
to the world so freely given,  
agent of God’s grand design:  
peace on earth and joy in heaven. [Refrain]



## Week 1: “For the beauty of the earth” (Soil and Land)

ASH WEDNESDAY

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### *A Little Dirt on Your Forehead*

Read Luke 10:8–13

*“They would have repented long ago, sitting in sackcloth and ashes.”  
(10:13b)*

One Ash Wednesday morning, I had an early appointment to pick up my car from the repair shop. As I stood waiting for my vehicle, I saw a man walk in with an ashen cross on his forehead. One of the service technicians looked at him and said, “You’ve got some dirt on your forehead.” The technician was unaware of what day it was, so the ashes just looked like dirt accidentally smudged across the man’s brow. Dirt does not belong on the head. It’s supposed to be on the ground, kept away from our head and hands.

This ritual of being marked with a cross made of ashes links us to the biblical memory of our spiritual ancestors who covered themselves in ashes as a sign of repentance. Ashes remind us that we are made from earth, and someday we will return to earth. Our span of life on this planet is so very short. A ritual like this helps us to reconnect with the very ground of our being.

On Ash Wednesday the cross is where we find the God we seek, hidden in the swipe of ashes. “You’ve got some dirt on your forehead.” Yes. That’s right where it belongs.

#### *Questions to ponder*

- In what ways am I taking care of the very soil from which all life arises?
- Can I use fewer chemicals on my property? Could I compost my organic waste that will eventually turn to new soil?
- Could I encourage a group from my church to clean up an abandoned lot and convert it to a garden space?

*Root us in your ground of being, God of Earth. Renew us with the scent of moist soil after rain. Thank you for the gift of ashes and dirt. May we care for the soil as it gives birth to new life. Amen.*

## *Fasting and Praying in the Temple of Earth*

Read Luke 2:32–42

*[Anna] never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day. (2:37)*

Most people think of the season of Lent as a time for fasting. Some give up certain foods. Others give up unhealthy habits. Isaiah 58:6 speaks of fasting from those things that lead to injustice and oppression. This may be a good time to think about engaging in an “eco-fast” during these forty days.

Consider fasting from activities that lead to environmental stress. Fast from using plastic bags. Or fast from making unnecessary consumer purchases. Consider a “carbon fast” to use less fossil fuels. Try fasting from eating meat. Give up the bottle—plastic water bottles, that is. Fast from garbage: aim for becoming a zero-waste household for a day, or even a week.

Luke tells us that Anna’s fasting and prayer was rewarded with seeing the Christ child, the Messiah for whom she had been waiting. As you fast during this season of Lent, keep your eyes, ears, heart, and mind attuned for encountering Christ. Like Anna, you may find yourself surprised by an unexpected visit that gives you a glimpse of God’s divine grace.

### *Spiritual practice*

Ask a group of friends or fellow pilgrims to meet weekly during Lent to discuss caring for God’s Creation and how to take action together. What eco-fast can you do as a group? Engaging in this eco-spiritual practice of fasting with others helps to form accountability groups and supports us on our Lenten journey.

*Holy God, join our prayers and fasting with Anna in this temple of Earth. Bless us with divine insight and help us to see Christ in our midst. Amen.*

## *Son of God, Child of Earth*

Read Luke 3:23–38

*Son of Enos, son of Seth, son of Adam, son of God. (3:38)*

Jesus' origin story in Luke shows us that he is both the Son of God and a child of Earth. In Luke 3:23–38, Jesus' ancestors are traced all the way back to Adam. Adam was himself a child of Earth. From the very soil, God created the first humans, fashioning them out of clay and breath. In fact, Adam's name is a Hebrew pun, a play on words. *Adamah* in Hebrew is the word for "soil." So Adam is literally an "Earthling."

Yes, the first humans and their progeny sinned and broke the covenant God made with them again and again. But the prophets knew that God was also working within this flawed humanity to bring about a Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:6). Through the generations, this promise sustained people in their most difficult times. Isaiah reminded the Israelites living in exile far away from their sacred land: "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined" (9:2).

The story of this light shining in darkness is what we tell as Christians. Christ came to redeem not just humanity, but the very Earth that gives rise to all life.

### *Spiritual practice*

Take a walk on an earthen place—a forest path, a meadow, or just a patch of grass between the sidewalk and the street. Take off your shoes if you can. Feel the ground beneath your feet. Give thanks to God for this Earth and all her children.

*Thank you, Holy God, for the ground beneath our feet. Thank you for the rich soil with nutrients to sustain life. Thank you for Adam and Eve, their children, and their children's children. Thank you for Jesus, Son of God, Child of Earth. Amen.*

## *Inheriting the Earth*

Read Matthew 5:1–6

*“Blessed are the meek for they will inherit the earth.” (5:5)*

The Greek word for “meek” is *praus*, which can mean gentleness or humbleness. We should not think that this word in Jesus’ Beatitudes means *weak*, however. We can be humble while still standing up for what is right, including standing up for the Earth itself. In fact, verse 6 declares that those who hunger and thirst for righteousness will be both blessed and filled.

What does it look like when the meek hunger and thirst for righteousness? I think of the young people in Our Children’s Trust who are fighting to sue the U.S. government to stop climate change, using the power of the law to preserve life on this planet—to protect the Earth. I think of the Indigenous children who stood up at Standing Rock to claim the sacredness of their land and resist the construction of a pipeline filled with filthy, explosive oil. I think of the young elected leaders in our country who are challenging their elders to create a Green New Deal—legislation that curbs greenhouse gas emissions and implements a plan to mitigate the worst effects of climate change with policies that lift up the poor and oppressed. Young people are doing this to bring about justice for people and the planet.

### *Questions to ponder*

- Who are the children with whom you have a close relationship? What do you hope for their future?
- Have you talked with them about their concerns about environmental issues? What worries them about climate disruption and their future lives?
- How might you support them in their efforts to pursue a right relationship with the natural world?

*Lift up young leaders who advocate for your Creation, Holy God. Bless them with meekness and a fierce pursuit of righteousness. Empower them to show us the way. Amen.*

## *Earth Worships God*

Read Psalm 96

*O sing to the LORD a new song; sing to the LORD, all the earth. (96:1)*

Psalm 96 addresses Earth not as an object, but as a subject capable of singing to God. This idea of Earth praising its Creator is something I contemplated with a group of seminary students as we hiked through Blanton Forest Natural Land Preserve in Kentucky. We had been thinking about the question, “Who is my neighbor?” throughout our immersion course in Appalachia. As we stood in the forest communing with the congregation of rhododendrons, ferns, huckleberries, and the mists of the mountain, we realized that Creation indeed praises God in its own way.

When we protect the mountains and trees, the waters and toadstools, the soil and stones, we enable Creation to join us in praise of the Creator. “Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy” (Psalm 96:12). But when we destroy them through processes like mountain top removal for coal mining or clear cutting for commercial “development,” we deprive God of worship. We also deprive ourselves of the opportunity to worship within the sanctuary of Earth itself.

### *Questions to ponder*

- What is a place in nature where you feel a special, even spiritual connection?
- What is it about that place that helps you connect to the sacred?
- What could you do to help protect and preserve this special, sacred place?

*Join our human voices with the voices of Creation, Holy Spirit. As you move through the trees enabling them to pray with “sighs too deep for words,” move us to honor you by preserving the natural places that bring honor and glory to our Creator. Amen.*

## *Fertilizing the Soil of Our Faith*

Read Luke 13:6–9

*“Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it.” (13:8)*

Jesus tells a parable about a man who wants to cut down his fig tree because it doesn't bear fruit. I have to admit, sometimes *I* am that fig tree owner. Sometimes I'm ready to give up hope.

And then I look at that gardener. What does the gardener do? He springs to action! He does everything within his power to prevent the owner from giving up on the tree. He pleads for the life of the tree, enthusiastically hauls out the shovel and wheelbarrow. He lays out his plan for replenishing the soil with nutrients from the fertilizer. And he makes his case for giving the tree just one more year to bear fruit. It may be a lost cause, but he's not ready to give up yet.

The gardener does not write off the tree as a lost cause. He gets in there, down in the muck, and gets his hands dirty. He grabs a shovel and starts digging. He rolls up his sleeves, grabs a handful of that smelly fertilizer, and starts filling it in around the base of the tree. And he hands me a shovel as well.

### *Spiritual practice*

Find a place outside where you can dig up a clump of dirt and hold it in your hand. Imagine this soil as your faith. Does it have the nutrients it needs? Is it rich and fertile or dry and lifeless? Pray for God to fertilize your faith so that your hope may be renewed.

*Change my mind, God of the fruitless tree. Show me what needs to be done to dig around the tree and replenish the soil of my faith. Hand me a shovel so that I may get to work. Amen.*

## *Good Soil*

Read Mark 4:1–9

*“Other seed fell into good soil and brought forth grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirty and sixty and a hundredfold.” (4:8)*

Sometimes we forget that Jesus taught and ministered in an agrarian society. His parables often refer to the elements of Creation because that’s what his listeners understood in deep and profound ways. They knew how important good soil was for producing the crops that fed their families. And they knew what happens when rocky soil or thorns choke seeds and prevent a fruitful harvest.

When we hear the almost daily litany of ecological crises affecting God’s Earth, we may find ourselves swinging between despair and denial that chokes the seeds of our faith. Yet, as ecotheologian Wilson Dickinson points out, “these challenges also issue a call for a different, simpler, more joyful life.”

Dickinson founded an organization called The Green Good News that “seeks to cultivate communities committed to finding renewal through the Gospel.” According to the organization’s website, they are “rediscovering the Good News through the practices and insights of sustainability and the food movement.” The Green Good News “works with churches, schools, and community organizations to integrate sustainable living and Christian discipleship. Grounded in initiatives in Central Kentucky, it also seeks to work with other congregations and communities with an emphasis on education.”

### *Spiritual practice*

Visit the website <https://greengoodnews.org/> to learn more about how the food movement, sustainability, and simple living are connected to Christian faith. Share the link with friends in or beyond your congregation and think about how you might cultivate the “good soil” of Jesus’ teaching in your own community.

*God of good soil, sow seeds of green ministry within our churches and communities. Cultivate networks of neighbors who plant gardens together, glean orchards and fields to feed those in poverty, and work for fair and just distribution of food resources. Amen.*