



First Fruits and Fig Trees To Hope and Act with Creation

A Devotional Study Guide





Alona's Chocolate Chip Cherry Cookies

In a mixer, cream together:

1 cup butter

1 cup sugar

1 cup brown sugar

add:

2 eggs, one at a time

2 tsp vanilla

2/3 cup cocoa powder

Add together in a separate bowl:

2 cups flour

1 tsp salt

1 tsp baking soda

1 tsp baking powder

Add to butter mixture, mix at low speed.

Add:

White chocolate chunks and dark chocolate chunks for a total amount of 2 cups.

1 cup chopped nuts

1/2 cup dried cherries

Form into cookies and bake at 350 for 12 minutes or until set in the middle, and just starting to brown at the edges.

This guide accompanies the worship series, First Fruits and Fig Trees: To Hope and Act with Creation. This worship series was created by a team working with the United Methodist Creation Justice Movement. The full series, written to coincide with the Season of Creation, 2024, includes sermon notes, children's materials, prayers, and other series elements and can be found at umcreationjustice.org

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A Word About Figs

The fig tree is mentioned in many books of the Bible. The fig was a staple food in Biblical times for the young and old, rich and poor, farmer and traveler, alike. Fig trees grew on pathways and along roadways, between fields, and next to people’s homes. There were and are different varieties of figs, and the people of Biblical times were agrarian, and knew how to cultivate and care for each of them.

Fig varieties during the Biblical period were a poor commercial crop. They ripened on the tree and were ready to eat at intervals rather than all at once. They didn’t travel far fresh. But they made a delicious snack, so popping a few ripe ones in your mouth as you passed along the path was a well-savored activity. Or, if you were a child, what fun to reach as high as possible up the trunk to find the ripest one you could reach!

Fig tree varieties could grow very large, with showy, green, canopies that spread out signaling to the passersby to come pick a juicy, ripe offering. On a hot day, sitting under a fig tree was restful and cooling. And there was plenty of room under the shade for you, your friends, and the sheep and goats, too.

As such, the fig tree’s shade was a good meeting place. It was a good place to sit and conduct business, to hear the latest news, and to hold lessons in Torah.

Our Old Testament stories set the standard as to what good things people could expect. Fig trees were a sign of community, prosperity, and nourishment. They provided shelter, shade, food, and conversation. They were a community good, meaning good for everyone.

Figs, as with other staple foods, were also understood to be a part of God’s blessing. There can be no complaining when there are figs to be enjoyed.

As says the Prophet Haggai:
“Is the seed yet in the granary?
Or the vine?
The fig tree?
Or the pomegranate?
Has the olive tree not borne fruit?
From this day forward,
I will bless you.”

As a handful of figs is proof of God’s blessing, so an empty hand is a sign of God’s displeasure. The Bible uses this contrast to help teach about how we should live together.

A greedy or warring population destroys the peace and prosperity of the community. In places where leaders are unrighteous, the vine withers and the fig bears no fruit.

If there is danger that things may become so unbalanced that the fig and vine will wither, the prophets raise a cry for repentance. They

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warn that greed and war will bring desolation. Turn toward peace! And reward will flow from that.

God is faithful. Our stories and psalms give us hope. Reading those, we learn that guilt from ill-deeds can be forgiven, justice will come, and the land can be restored and made green again.

We hear this blessing and these promises of renewed prosperity in the words of Joel (2:21-22):

“...rejoice and be glad, for the Lord is about to do great things! Don’t be afraid, animals of the field, for the meadows of the wilderness will turn green; the tree will bear its fruit; the fig tree and grapevine will give their full yield.”

Hear also the blessing of restored community in Zechariah (3:10):

“On that day... everyone will invite their neighbors to sit beneath their vines and the fig trees.”



First Fruits and Figs Week One - Abundance

John 1:44-51

Philip was from Bethsaida, the hometown of Andrew and Peter.

Philip found Nathanael and said to him, “We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law and the Prophets: Jesus, Joseph’s son, from Nazareth.” Nathanael responded, “Can anything from Nazareth be good?”

Philip said, “Come and see.”

Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him and said about him, “Here is a genuine Israelite in whom there is no deceit.”

Nathanael asked him, “How do you know me?”

Jesus answered, “Before Philip called you, I saw you under the fig tree.”

Nathanael replied, “Rabbi, you are God’s Son. You are the king of Israel.”

Jesus answered, “Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these! I assure you that you will see heaven open and God’s angels going up to heaven and down to earth on the Human One.”

Haggai 2:18-19

Is the seed yet in the granary—or the vine, the fig tree, or the pomegranate—or has the olive tree not borne fruit?

From this day forward, I will bless you.

First Fruits and Blackberry Pies

The first church I served was in a rural county in Washington State. The south county line was the Columbia River, and the forests and grasses were lush with little rivers and creeks all feeding south, downstream through the Columbia River watershed, and then almost immediately out to sea.

The people in the county were independent, many lived off the land around them, and everyone knew their neighbors. There was one high school, one community center, and everyone knew who

baked the best pies. But there was something not everyone knew, and that was where to get the best, juiciest, sweetest blackberries.

The lore was thick. Everyone agreed that there, in the county, was a special place where the very best, native, *real* blackberries grew—a patch blessed personally by the Creator.

It was also generally understood that while many *claimed* to know where these special blackberries grew, only some people actually did. And you could tell whose

bucket was full of the best fruit just from the taste. The real berries were sweeter, darker, a little smaller. And, once you knew where to pick them, the only competition were the bears.

These succulents were fruits of the first order. Not only did the ripening of these first fruits herald the start of the berry season, more importantly, they brought the first pies of the pie season.

This brings me to the second truth of this wonderful community: these good fruits were community fruits.





Sure, there were a lot of individual bragging rights, yet bragging was best done to impress others, such as at the community center dinners or local breakfast cafe. (They had pies, too.)

This was a small town. There were no giant ag corporations who had elbowed in, and no niche Michelin Star pickers. These were home-grown, home-soil, home-sun berries. Although the pickers in the know got the bucket-filling glory, the bounty was never singular. The berries were the very best eating when they were shared.

This sharing of the berries was integral to everything about that fruit. Think about it, every pie could be sliced into six or eight pieces. The berries went on ice-cream, into cakes, and made into the coveted gift of prize-winning preserves.

On the off season, there was wistful

talk of the days to be spent in the hills once berry season came round again. The pickers made plans well in advance, storing up buckets and supplies. They laughed and laughed and laughed sharing so many stories of berry picking passed. And there was a lot of anticipation in the first fruits yet to come.

This story is far bigger than one county, one hill, and one berry. This story echoes in our histories, in our Bibles, and in our communities, everywhere. In serving this parish, hearing the stories and sharing the joy of true-picked-special-place-joy-baked blackberry pie, I got a precious gift, and a further glimpse into the generosity and bounty of the Creator.

The beautiful Biblical law of first fruits is that this bounty belongs to God. This fruit is gathered in joy and gratitude. This goodness, given freely and joyfully, is an expression

of prosperity and plenty to be shared by the whole community.

The texts chosen for this study guide coincide with those chosen to celebrate the Season of Creation worship series from the United Methodist Creation Justice Movement. In reading stories of fig trees, we also take an honest look at the environmental challenges we face. Our theme will center figs and berries. Please include in the celebration the native fruits wherever you live!

In the fig tree we can explore Biblical stories and teaching, both good and bad, to better understand the abundance of God, and God's desire that we share in this abundance, the whole creation, together.



Questions

1. We all have varied life experiences and backgrounds. Some of us grew up on a farm, others have never set foot on one. Some get their produce from small markets and local sellers, others buy groceries at multi-story grocery stores with built in bakeries and butcher shops.

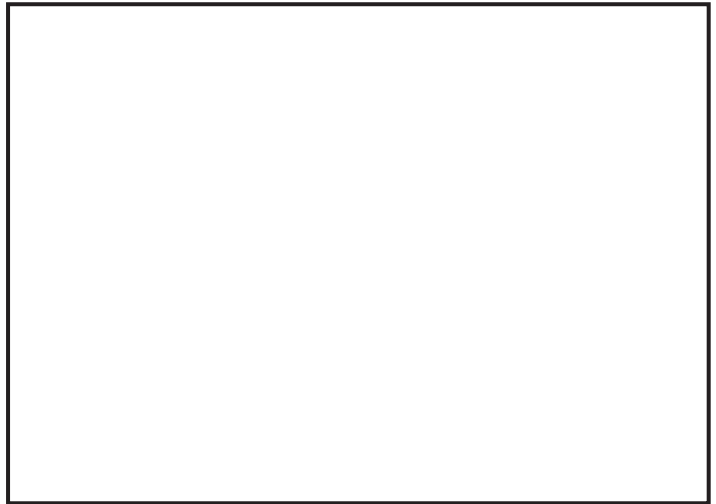
However different we may be, we all share the experience of summer and harvest-time fruit.

In the box, right, note your life experience with how you bring food to your table, be it in a paper sack, or basket. Next, remember a time when you had a chance to eat and share delicious fruit—berries, guava, figs, or mangoes—and, in a few words, share what that experience was like.

2. This week we think about abundance. Again, our life experiences here may be very different. Some of us have worked in orchards or helped to bring in a harvest of strawberries. Others may have seen abundance in the mounds of fresh bananas or blueberries when we shop.

Your life experience matters here, too.

What does abundance mean to you? When you think of the fruits—the real, juicy, sweet and plump fruits of God’s creation—what does abundance look like to you? What makes abundance?



This space is yours. You might like to use color pencils to add color to the drawing, right. Or perhaps you want to note your thoughts from this week’s readings or conversations, below.



Abundance

Inspired by Psalm 128

Abundant God, God of happiness and blessing! Berry-making, merry-making Lord of Life, who fills the vine with fruit and the orchards with plenty for many generations! You created this world full of strawberries, raspberries, puckering gooseberries, fat, round cherries and sweet, ripe figs. We seek your abundance, your peace, and your blessing. God of the first fruits, we have not valued the abundance of this earth as we should. We have paved over your meadows with asphalt. We forgot about the sacredness of berries and the goodness of your household of abundance. Re-plant us under the fig tree. Let us picnic in the berry patch. Let us learn anew to walk with you as a berry-stained people, happy in your Love. Amen.

Prayer and Action This Week

This page invites you to prayer and activities through the week. Choose five days that work for you. If you need to switch up the order, feel free to do so. Heads up! For some of these activities, you might need to think ahead. Read the whole page through at the beginning of your week.

Day One - Prayer

Pray the prayer “Abundance” on the previous page, reading it out loud, twice. What part of the prayer stands out for you? What words might you want to add? In the box, right, write a few words, then shape those words into a prayerful phrase. Write that phrase on a small piece of paper and carry it with you this week.

Day Two - Appreciation

Berry appreciation! Write down the name of your favorite berry. Describe it. Note what you like about it, is it color, texture, sweetness...? Close your eyes for a moment and imagine it is right in front of you. Focus to find one word that speaks to why this berry is divine. Write that word in the box.

Day Three - Gratitude

Read Haggai 2:18-19 from this week. Reflect on the ways God has blessed you, from the simplest things to the biggest. Once you have written your list, give a prayer of thanks and gratitude.



Day Four - Creation

Take a hike or short walk as you are able. At some point, find a place to sit outside in the creation. This can be on a rock, on a park bench, or outside your home, as long as you are out in the midst of the natural world. Sit quietly, breathe, and experience the outside air and any Holy Spirit breezes. Practice quiet noticing. Open your eyes, what do you notice? See if you can find something growing in every color. What do you see?

Day Five - Generosity

Share a treat! Choose a berry—blueberry, strawberry, raspberry, whatever berry (or fruit!)—and do something to share. Perhaps make blueberry pancakes for the family. Or raspberry muffins for your Bible study group. Or, bake a blackberry pie and celebrate God’s goodness with a shared dessert.



First Fruits and Figs Week Two - Repentance

Luke 21: 29-33

Jesus told them a parable: “Look at the fig tree and all the trees. When they sprout leaves, you can see for yourselves and know that summer is near. In the same way, when you see these things happening, you know that God’s kingdom is near. I assure you that this generation won’t pass away until everything has happened. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will certainly not pass away.”

Jeremiah 24:1-10

... the Lord showed me two baskets of figs... One basket was filled with fresh and ripe figs; the other filled with rotten figs—too rotten to eat. And the Lord asked me: “What do you see, Jeremiah?”

I replied: “Figs! Some good ones and others very bad—so bad that they can’t be eaten.”

Then the Lord said to me: “The Lord, the God of Israel, proclaims: Just as with these good figs, I will treat kindly the Judean exiles that I have sent

from this place to Babylon. I regard them as good, and I will bring them back to this land. I will build them up and not pull them down; I will plant them and not dig them up. I will give them a heart to know me, for I am the Lord. They will be my people, and I will be their God, for they will return to me with all their heart.”

And just like the rotten figs that are so bad that they can’t be eaten, the Lord says, “I will do to Judah’s King Zedekiah and his officials, as well as the remaining few in Jerusalem and those who are living in Egypt. I will make them an object of horror and evil to all the kingdoms of the earth.

“Wherever I scatter them, they will be disgraced and insulted, mocked and cursed. I will send the sword, famine, and disease against them until they vanish from the fertile land that I gave to their ancestors.”

The Path That Leads to Life

Of all our weekly readings, this is by far the hardest week. There is a reason why popular depictions of Old Testament prophets show them with wild hair, bugged out eyes, hopping around like lunatics. These readings are frightening!

The word nightmare would not be too harsh.

I have at times had recurring dreams and sometimes nightmares. We all have things that frighten us, yet nightmares can

seem too real. Dreams can be a gift to help us process our experiences, fears, and hopes. But nightmares? They do not feel like a gift.

One recurring dream terrified me so much that I still remember it. In the dream, I was walking along a scrubby path between a dirt road and a grassy meadow. Along the path was a ranch style fence, such as you see in many photos of rural areas as you pass from one community to the next.

It was a mild day with a nice small breeze, and the field next to me was grown with grasses and flowers, yellow and golden-green like the colors you find in beautiful Oregon.

In the distance, I saw a pole or spike in the middle of the field, sticking straight up. There was no missing it. The moment I saw it, I was hit with a thud of terror. It felt like someone had hit me in the chest and sucked out my breath.





I continued walking, but my path took me closer and closer. It loomed shadowy and threatening. I would awake in a panic, my heart racing.

I had this dream a few times, it was so hard! I shared the dream with a counselor, who listened as I talked through it—my words tumbling. She encouraged me to be brave, to look again at the memory of the dream, and even, to move closer.

And I did. I closed my eyes, and I got brave. I imagined walking on that dusty path. I came to an opening in the fence, and I stepped through. I walked through the grasses, tall-stemmed yellow wildflowers, the smell of green, toward the thing that scared me. My fear was as a fist gripping my heart.

As I got closer, I saw it was taller than me. A lot taller. It was in shadow, but rose sturdily, securely. I stepped closer. I began to see shapes as light broke through the shadow.

Something was curled around the pole—more than one. Two things wrapped together.

Snakes! At first, it was a shock. And then, I was close enough to see without shadow. I realized that what I was looking at was the staff of life.

I began sobbing. It was a complete turn and unexpected realization. This was the staff Moses raised in the desert to teach and safeguard his people! This is how they knew to pay attention, and what to attend to. This was a sign to ward *away* evil, and to call us—me—to healing, hope, life and wellbeing.

In facing my nightmare, I was given a gift beyond imagining. I saw that I was afraid to live. I was afraid to heal. I was afraid to take the next steps that healing would require. And I also saw that this fear would not and could not last. In front of me was the true and life-giving path ahead. God would be with me.

In the readings this week, Jeremiah's words are harsh. He speaks because he wants us to *pay attention*. Jeremiah wants us to know the path we are on *is not the path to life*.

God is calling us to live without violence, to push back against greed, to receive the gifts of whole, sweet, fresh baskets of ripe figs, a gift of the creation.

In Luke, we hear a similar thing. There is foreboding, but much hope. A time is coming—it can be here, right now—where we once and for all embrace the kingdom and kingdom that is God's.

As we look at the climate crisis, we must listen to the prophets and heed these words. The path we are on is not the path of life. Yet, we can turn! And best of all, God will be with us.



Questions

1. There is much information available now about climate change. Sorting through it, or even looking at it at all, can feel overwhelming. When we read texts like the Jeremiah today and think about how out of balance things seem to be, it can bring up a lot of thoughts and feelings.

Please use this space to share as you are comfortable what you are thinking or feeling after reading this and in thinking about our earth and environmental challenges. If you are comfortable doing so, consider sharing what you write with your group.

2. The word “repentance” is often used in a way that can feel very judgmental, with a lot of finger shaking. Yet the word itself has a more practical meaning. At its simplest, it just means “to turn.” To turn away from something, and to turn toward something else. For our reflection, we can think about repentance as turning away from things that cause harm, and turning toward the things that bring life.

When it comes to environmental stewardship, what ways do you see that your community, and you yourself, can turn towards God? What things might you need to let go? What things might you want to do, instead?

This space is yours. You might like to use color pencils to add color to the drawing, right. Or perhaps you want to note your thoughts from this week’s readings or conversations, below.



Repentance

Inspired by Psalm 85

Peace-Speaking God, Creator, Restorer, Road-Maker, Truth-Namer, you see us in our failure to be peaceful, faithful, or truthful. Bring us back to life again. Restore us from generations of harm. Lead us from our foolish ways, and never let us return to them! Let truth again spring from the ground! Let righteousness again gaze down with justice from heaven! Saving God, it is you who gives what is good. It is you who blesses the land to yield its produce. We will honor you. We will step in the path of righteousness beside you. We will be the stewards you call us to be, bringing your glory again to the land. And we will rejoice in you, always! Amen.

Prayer and Action This Week

This page invites you to prayer and activities through the week. Choose five days that work for you. If you need to switch up the order, feel free to do so. Heads up! For some of these activities, you might need to think ahead. Read the whole page through at the beginning of your week.

Day One - Prayer

Last week we wrote a prayer to carry for the rest of the week. Today, write a new prayer. Pray the prayer "Repentance" on the previous page, reading it out loud twice. What part of the prayer stands out for you? What words might you want to add? In the box, right, write a few words, then shape those words into a prayerful phrase. Write that phrase on a small piece of paper and carry it with you this week.

Day Two - Appreciation

Berry appreciation! Last week we named a favorite fruit or berry. This week, write down the name of your least-liked berry or fruit. Instead of finding fault, find two things to appreciate about it. Imagine it is right in front of you. Focus to find one or two words that speak to why this berry/fruit, too, is divine.

Day Three - Gratitude

Reflecting on food waste is not usually thought of when we think of acts of gratitude. But consider the reading, where a whole basket of figs is wasted! In the US, we waste a third of our food. In other words, for every three baskets of figs, one full basket goes to waste. This happens in our own kitchens, too. Part of the solution is to deepen our gratitude. Even as the fruit of this good creation nourishes us, so let our gratitude motivate us. Today, check out the food storage tips here: epa.gov/recycle/preventing-wasted-food-home#storage. Then, take a few minutes to reorganize your food storage. Once you have separated the apples and bananas from the berries and squashes, lift a prayer of gratitude for the farmer, for the fields, for the workers, for God, and for this good earth.



Day Four - Creation

Take a hike or short walk again this week, as you are able. Find a place to sit outside in the creation, on a rock, a park bench, or outside your home, in the midst of the natural world. Sit quietly, breathe, and experience the outside air and any Holy Spirit breezes. Today, practice listening. You can keep your eyes open or closed. But focus on what your ears can hear, just allow the sounds to wash over you. What are you hearing?

Day Five - Generosity

Share a treat! Foodbanks get a lot of donations of practical things, but rarely does that include nutritious treats like canned cherries, dried blueberries, or fresh fruit. Consider, if you can, making a donation of one or more of these items to your local foodbank or church box.



First Fruits and Figs Week Three - Restoration

Mark 11:12-14

The next day, after leaving Bethany, Jesus was hungry. From far away, he noticed a fig tree in leaf, so he went to see if he could find anything on it. When he came to it, he found nothing except leaves, since it wasn't the season for figs. So he said to it, "No one will ever again eat your fruit!" His disciples heard this.

Micah 4:3-4

God will judge between the nations and settle disputes of mighty nations, which are far away.

They will beat their swords into iron plows and their spears into pruning tools.

Nation will not take up sword against nation; they will no longer learn how to make war.

All will sit underneath their own grapevines, under their own fig trees. There will be no one to terrify them; for the mouth of the Lord of heavenly forces has spoken.

Restoration and Fruitfulness

Let's talk fig trees. Even as the words of the Bible are infused with spiritual meaning, yet it is also filled with very real, everyday things. For this week, it is helpful to consider the everyday, earthly tree called *ficus carica*.

Mark 11:13 is a favorite "stump the pastor" Bible verse. The question is, why did Jesus get so mad that there was no fruit on the fig tree, when "it was not the season for figs?" I mean, look out raspberry bushes if Jesus gets hungry in December!

This question is a stumper, and this reading was the one I chose for my first seminary paper for my New Testament Studies class. I chose

it for two reasons, one is that the Book of Mark is a favorite of mine. And secondly, I decided I would use this text to impress the heck out of my professor.

Did it work? Was he impressed? Um, yes, three re-writes later. But I tell you, I learned a lot about Mark and I learned a lot about fig trees.

Fig tree botany is amazing, an awe-inspiring example of God's good creation. They give back in multiplying the good that comes from them. Figs can grow with very little water. They find a way! Their leaves are a cool canopy in hot summer. Their fruit has two crops! The first crop, called *breba*, in

spring, and the second, the sweeter, is the summer crop.

Fig trees also demonstrate the interconnectedness of living things. They provide the home, nourishment, and nursery for the fig wasp, which in turn pollinates the fruit.

The plump and sweet figs can have well over a thousand tiny seeds—enough to grow orchards more trees, feed and nourish every creature, and provide a roosting place for a multitude of birds.

Step back, ye mustard seeds, ha! The tiny fig seed is a match for your marvels.

The thing is, when Jesus sees the





showy green canopy of a fig tree growing along the road, he was absolutely right to expect that a snack awaited him. The snack would have been *breba*, the first crop in the spring. And, even more so, the showy canopy of this particular tree would have promised a bumper crop!

Any traveler would be excited by the expectation of a big crop of first fruit and headed over. This was exactly what Jesus did. But what happens instead is that the tree has played a sort of trick. It looked like it had produced many yummy figs. And instead, there were only leaves and no fruit at all.

Any hungry person might have cursed at the tree a little in disappointment. Jesus's response tells us that the tree's fruitlessness was a fault far worse than that.

This showy, braggadocious tree has produced no fruit at all. This tree has

taken up nourishment from rain and sun and soil and given nothing back. Nothing for the traveler, or farmer, or animals and insects that depend on its fruit. It is all out of whack.

Remember Jesus's words for the showy priests of Jerusalem who ignored the widows and the poor? Who lorded their wealth and status over others with fine clothes?

Jesus remembers. And this is why this was "not the season for figs." Jesus isn't talking about spring or summertime. The word Jesus uses here is *kairos*. This word *kairos* means so much more than just "season." *Kairos* is the word Jesus uses when he talks about the kingdom of God.

God declared creation good. God tasked humans with environmental stewardship, which means they are to carry out God's commandment that life on earth be fruitful and multiply. Instead, humans sinned

against God, and that sin affects the whole creation. It did in Jesus's time, and it does now, too. Jesus is not kidding around.

Yet while Mark gives us our beginning place, the Micah reading shows us our landing place. Micah lets us know that it is not too late to do everything we can. God is a restoration God, and we are a restoration people. We are here on earth, where God has blessed life on every corner of the globe.

This earth is God's creation. As we address the imbalance that is climate change, Micah reminds us to put down the tools of violence. This earth is our home. This is where peace and prosperity, and the restored fig trees and grapevines are, and will be found.



Questions

1. In English, we use the term "fruitless" to describe an effort that is ultimately useless. A fruitless task, we say, is not worth doing as it will come to nothing. Jesus takes it one step further. He sees the fruit tree as not only fruitless, but also harmful. I think of the idiom, "Don't throw good money after bad."

I think all of us have times where we "throw good money after bad." There are times we continue to invest time and money in things that are actually harmful.

When it comes to environmental stewardship, where in your life or your community do you see this happening? Where are our efforts to produce fruit actually causing harm?



2. This week, as the prophet Micah speaks of transforming weapons of violence into tools for cultivating plenty, we see that even the worst challenges can be transformed by faith and action.

In applying that to environmental stewardship: the need for restoration includes restorative farming, a process that rebuilds soils and native plant communities, with nature-positive techniques to support healthy plant growth.

In thinking of your church yard and properties, what native plants are growing there? What fruit tree or native berry could you plant?

This space is yours. You might like to use color pencils to add color to the drawing, right. Or perhaps you want to note your thoughts from this week's readings or conversations, below.



Restoration

Inspired by Psalm 80

Shepherd God, almighty and enthroned in heaven, be visible in your command! Lead your forces to chase down those who would destroy your vineyard and your people! Revive us! We call on your name! Your fruiting vines and canopies are being destroyed by greed, by pests, by drought. Your cedars are thrown down. There is so little of your forest left. The land is burned by fire. Our bread is made of tears. Lord God of Heavenly Forces, hear us. We are yours, we are your vine, your roots, your canopy. Our lives, too, are rooted in this soil. Restore us. Teach us better. Teach us to tend to your vines. We will be the shepherds of the trees. We will restore your orchards and your forests. For we are your very own. We will be a restoration people, for your glory, for your kingdom, and for this time. Amen.

Prayer and Action This Week

This page invites you to prayer and activities through the week. Choose five days that work for you. If you need to switch up the order, feel free to do so. Heads up! For some of these activities, you might need to think ahead. Read the whole page through at the beginning of your week.

Day One - Prayer

Today you are invited to write a new prayer to carry with you for the rest of the week. Look to the prayer "Restoration" on the previous page and read it out loud twice. What words stand out? What might you want to add? In the box, right, write a few words, then shape those words into a prayerful phrase. Write that phrase on a piece of paper and carry it with you this week.

Day Two - Appreciation

The last couple of weeks you have been invited to appreciate a fruit or berry. This week, think for a moment about what our world would be like if every tree and shrub were like the fig tree from Mark. Imagine if there were no fruits! No berries at all. Write a few words about what a world without fruit would be like.

Day Three - Gratitude

Yesterday, we considered fruitlessness. Today imagine fruitfulness, with the fruit of this earth restored! Not only restored, but imagine fresh, sweet, growing fruit bursting from every tree branch and filling the leafy pockets of bushy shrubs. What might this look like, and be like? What creatures would rejoice?



Day Four - Creation

Take a hike or short walk again this week, as you are able. Find again a place to sit outside in the creation, on a rock, a park bench, or outside your home, in the midst of the natural world. Sit quietly, breathe, and experience the outside air and any Holy Spirit breezes. Today, as you breathe in through your nose, what do you smell? You can keep your eyes open or closed. But focus your senses on the smells around you. What are the scents of this patch of earth?

Day Five - Generosity

Share a treat! Choose a fruit. Choose any kind of fruit that is juicy and sweet. If it is the off-season, choosing frozen fruit is great, too! Or purchase something from a local store or bakery. Prepare something to share for fellowship hour at the church using your choice of fruit. An apricot cake? Sure! Kiwi slices? Perfect! Fruit salad with grapes and mangos? Delicious!



First Fruits and Figs Week Four - Trust

Matthew 21:18-22

Early in the morning as Jesus was returning to the city, he was hungry. He saw a fig tree along the road, but when he came to it, he found nothing except leaves. Then he said to it, "You'll never again bear fruit!" The fig tree dried up at once.

When the disciples saw it, they were amazed. "How did the fig tree dry up so fast?" they asked.

Jesus responded, "I assure you that if you have faith and don't doubt, you will not only do what was done to the fig tree. You will even say to this mountain, 'Be lifted up and thrown into the lake.' And it will happen. If you have faith, you will receive whatever you pray for."

Matthew 24:32-35

Learn this parable from the fig tree. After its branch becomes tender and it sprouts new leaves, you know that summer is near. In the same way, when you see all these things, you know that the

Human One is near, at the door. I assure you that this generation won't pass away until all these things happen. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will certainly not pass away.

Joel 2:21-24

Don't fear, fertile land; rejoice and be glad, for the Lord is about to do great things! Don't be afraid, animals of the field, for the meadows of the wilderness will turn green; the tree will bear its fruit; the fig tree and grapevine will give their full yield. Children of Zion, rejoice and be glad in the Lord your God, because he will give you the early rain as a sign of righteousness; he will pour down abundant rain for you, the early and the late rain, as before. The threshing floors will be full of grain; The vats will overflow with new wine and fresh oil.

Trusting God and the Wild Cranberry

I live in beautiful Southern Oregon, and I can promise you the green-gold hills here will win your heart.

I am a newcomer here. I moved here with my husband to serve a local church. I have lived in three states and three countries, with memories of deserts and rivers and snow, but Southern Oregon continues to grow on me.

I am a forest girl, a woman who loves the forests, the wildlife, and the orchards of Oregon. I have become all too aware of just how far climate change has encroached on this beautiful land—in the big things, certainly, with the droughts and the fires—but also, in the small, everyday things.

Our area is famous for its wildlife.

The first summer we were here, just weeks after move-in, a mama deer chose our backyard for a nursery. Her wee fawn slept mere feet from our deck, and once it was old enough, it entertained itself by peeking in through our windows.

But while we have critters everywhere here, plants and animals who have lived here for millennia,





settlement, industry, and climate change has transformed this land around them.

I live on the land of the Takelma and Shasta people. They are the caretakers who cultivated and protected the living plants and animals here. When the first Europeans came, this land was teeming with life.

The land is still beautiful, but it is not the same. The impacts of settlement and climate change are visible everywhere, including in my front and back yards. When we moved in, for example, there was only one native shrub—a lone Oregon grape—growing in our yard.

Three years ago we added more native plants including oaks, ferns, manzanita, and one native cranberry, among them.

Now, it is well known that the deer here are famously voracious. With their habitat carved up by roads, lawns, and fences, there is precious

little of their native bounty, *their “first fruits,”* left to eat. As a result, they eat anything and everything else. And the year we planted, they discovered that native cranberry.

It is only by the mercy of God that that cranberry survived. Within days that poor cranberry was stripped of almost every green shoot. Adam and Eve in the garden of paradise didn’t work half so hard for a little bit of covering as did that poor cranberry that first week!

All the deer left it was its white crown of florets, poking up defiantly. That poor, determined, mighty, near stark-naked cranberry bush bore the brunt of generations of deer eager to taste again the natural abundance that God meant for this place, their place.

The native people in their homeland knew this. Newcomers like me, we need to listen and learn.

Our texts for this week help to give us strength for this work. Matthew tells

us that no matter how daunting it may be, we have the power by faith that abundance can be, and will be, restored.

As Matthew assures us that we have the power to change, so Joel speaks to the fullness of just how much can be put right:

“Don’t fear, fertile land; rejoice and be glad, for the Lord is about to do great things! Don’t be afraid, animals of the field, for the meadows of the wilderness will turn green; the tree will bear its fruit; the fig tree and grapevine will give their full yield.”

Perhaps you, like myself and others, are wondering how to get started. Maybe the first step doesn’t have to be a big one. Maybe we can get started, planting that first wild cranberry bush, and trust that it will live.



Questions

1. Over millennia, Indigenous people have been the caretakers of land, which they cultivated and shaped for preservation and plenty. Today, 80% of the natural biodiversity on this planet is tended and preserved by Indigenous people. Indigenous people are not only preserving the land, but also actively working to restore both natural landscapes and species that are at risk for extinction.

Thinking about environmental stewardship, what models of caring for the land might we learn from these experts? How can people of faith support the efforts of Indigenous people in their communities?

2. In week two of this study, one of the follow up questions addressed the heartbreak you may be feeling with the worsening impacts of climate change. Perhaps you shared your feelings of loss, grief, or anger with your group?

This week, let's return to that question. Review your notes from Week Two. Then, for this week, reflect on the words from the prophet Joel who declares, "Rejoice and be glad, for the Lord is about to do great things!" In the box, right, think about what it means to put your trust in God. If God is doing great things, that means we can be part of that. What hope can you find as you trust in God?

This space is yours. You might like to use color pencils to add color to the drawing, right. Or perhaps you want to note your thoughts from this week's readings or conversations, below.



Trust

Inspired by Psalm 148

Amazing God, God of Earth, moon, stars, skies, and the highest, heaven! Even the waters above the universe drench the creation with Life. Spring rain, praise God! Sun and moon, praise God! Mountains and fruit trees, praise God! We, your people, praise God! Lord, we are your faithful ones. Yet we have made a mess. The Earth lies under an atmosphere that is off balance. The heat presses down, too hot. The rain comes too much or not enough! Fear rises like the leviathan. We turn to you, Lord! Command what you have created. Command the earthly powers and destroy the smokestacks. Let the fire and hail, snow and smoke, and stormy wind be as you intend. God, you are our trust, our hope, and our center. We are your close ones. We believe! You are our salvation, and in you, we will not be afraid. We will not fear the fires, the wild animals, or the ocean storms. For you are our strength and we are your people. Amen.

Prayer and Action This Week

This page invites you to prayer and activities through the week. Choose five days that work for you. If you need to switch up the order, feel free to do so. Heads up! For some of these activities, you might need to think ahead. Read the whole page through at the beginning of your week.

Day One - Prayer

Once again, you are invited to write a new prayer to carry with you for the rest of the week. Look to the prayer on the previous page, "Trust," and read it out loud twice. What words stand out? What might you want to add? In the box, right, write a few words, then shape those words into a prayerful phrase. Write that phrase on a small piece of paper and carry it with you this week.

Day Two - Appreciation

Do you think you can appreciate a wasp? Many people can definitely find good things to say about bees—I mean, how cute is that there's a bee out there called a Blueberry Bee? Insects and plants have essential, life-making partnerships. Without the fig wasp, there wouldn't be figs. Without flies (yes, *flies*) ants, and other insects, we would not have mangoes! Today, see if you can find things to appreciate about our wasp pollinators.

Day Three - Gratitude

Yesterday was a day of appreciation. Today, the opportunity is to take that appreciation to the next level—gratitude. Pollinators may be buzzy, creepy, stingy little beasts, but they are ours and part of this good creation. Can you praise God for them? Write your praises in the box, right.



Day Four - Creation

Take a short walk, as you are able. Instead of sitting today, find a spot where you can do some gentle exploring, under a tree or in a garden. Look at what is right next to you and all around you. Focus your senses. (Stay away from things like poison oak or hemlock, snakes or mushrooms.) Where it is safe, explore the environment with touch. Touch green leaves and stems of plants you are familiar with. If it is autumn, pick up a dried leaf. This is a chance to see anew. Pluck a dandelion or blade of grass. Look closely. What do you see?

Day Five - Generosity

What does everybody love? Jam! Today is a day to share some jam or jelly. Maybe you make your own? If not, pick up a couple of jars of jam today, strawberry or raspberry or quince or whatever you want to share. Then, give them away. Donate one jar to the local foodbank. Share the other with a teacher or neighbor, or maybe share one in a swap with friends!



First Fruits and Figs Week Five - Flourishing

Luke 13:6-9

Jesus told this parable: “A man owned a fig tree planted in his vineyard. He came looking for fruit on it and found none. He said to his gardener, ‘Look, I’ve come looking for fruit on this fig tree for the past three years, and I’ve never found any. Cut it down! Why should it continue depleting the soil’s nutrients?’ The gardener responded, ‘Lord, give it one more year, and I will dig around it and give it fertilizer. Maybe it will produce fruit next year; if not, then you can cut it down.’”

Zechariah 3:7-10

“The Lord of heavenly forces proclaims: If you will walk in my paths, if you will keep my charge, then you will lead my house and guard my courts, and I will allow you to walk among those standing here.”

Now listen, High Priest Joshua, you and your companions sitting before you—for these men are a sign—look, I am about to bring my servant, Branch.

See this stone that I have put before Joshua. Upon one stone, there are seven facets. I am about to engrave an inscription on it, says the Lord of heavenly forces. I will remove the guilt of that land in one day.

On that day, says the Lord of heavenly forces, everyone will invite their neighbors to sit beneath their vines and the fig trees.”

From Squandering to Flourishing

As we come to the end of our series, we can reflect on the lessons and readings together.

We spoke of the abundance that God wishes for us, an abundance that was present at creation, and is present still in the wild cranberry and the fig tree.

We reflected also on the environmental challenges we face, and the need for repentance. We must pay attention. There is no sugar coating to the truth of the climate crisis.

It is just the truth that the natural world is out of balance and must be restored. It is also the truth that as we meet these challenges, no matter what they are, we can trust in God.

In this time of urgency, Jeremiah’s words are close to our hearts, words that speak to our troubles:

“there are no grapes on the vine, no figs on the tree, only withered leaves. They have squandered what I have given them!”

What has been squandered must now be conserved, treasured, and

restored. This we can do. This is what we were born to do!

The readings this week are a roadmap. While Jeremiah lays out hard truth, the Luke reading reassures us that it is not too late. Finally, Zechariah lets us know how, how can go from squandering to flourishing.

This week’s story is about neighbors. As Jesus asked the pharisees those many years ago, Zechariah this week invites us to ask again: “Who is your neighbor?”





When I was serving a church in southwestern Washington, a citizen effort developed to stop a proposed crude oil transfer station from being built on the banks of the Columbia River. The oil would have been brought in by rail, stored, then shipped out to sea—up to 15 million gallons of crude oil every day.

The effort to stop this crude oil transfer station took years, and it mobilized a coalition that included people of faith, tribal groups, business owners, environmental groups, first responders, teamsters, grandparents, youth and more.

I met hundreds of people who shared a vision for environmental stewardship that would protect the Columbia River. Construction would have destroyed the riverbank, and the emissions would have fed the climate crisis.

There was need also to support the people and communities on the front lines, people who would have

borne the worst impacts including air pollution and potential accidents.

During the effort to stop the oil trains and the oil transfer station, thousands gathered to be heard. We were a coalition, but in truth we became a neighborhood. We were neighbors helping neighbors as we sought to stop the project.

Two people of faith, Don and Alona Steinke, with many others, were key organizers in helping to bring people together. Alona was never empty handed. Not only was there pizza, but Alona would bring homemade, delicious treats to share, including her chocolate chip cherry cookies.

That set of neighbors, that coalition, stopped that project. Today, there is a public park, walking paths, a business park, and homes along the riverbank instead of oil shipping. At the port, the teamsters unload wind turbines. Today, the area employs far more people than it would have if the oil project had gone through.

Restoration is not only possible, it's faithful. It will take all of us. It will take local people. It will take rediscovering neighbors and making new ones.

Or, in the words of the prophet Zechariah, "On that day, says the Lord of heavenly forces, everyone will invite their neighbors to sit beneath their vines and the fig trees."

Neighbor-making has always been what church is about. Church is special, it is where we trust in God and serve our neighbor. It is where we build bonds of community for wellbeing. It is where we choose—on purpose and with full trust in God—the path that leads to life.

People of faith can be and must be a vital part of this new, necessary neighborhood. Let us together build resilience, restore relationships, and flourish.



Questions

1. What does the word "flourishing" mean to you? What would it look like to have a flourishing of creation where you live? What might a flourishing planet look like?

2. Who is your neighbor?



This space is yours. You might like to use color pencils to add color to the drawing, right. Or perhaps you want to note your thoughts from this week's readings or conversations, below.



Flourishing

Inspired by Psalm 72

Bounteous God, who raises up mountains of peace and hills of righteousness, who causes the land to overflow with good things, sustaining life and lifting the heart to happiness. We know what it is you want from us and our leaders. We are to bring justice to the poor, care for needy children, to have compassion and save lives. We come both as people who need justice and people who have caused injustice. Set us on the right path. Flourishing God who does wondrous things, bring us abundant grain growing green on restored soil and happy land, stirred by joyful wind from the mountain. We will hold high and bless our gathering baskets, filled with your harvest, in every season! Amen.

Prayer and Action This Week

This page invites you to prayer and activities through the week. Choose five days that work for you. If you need to switch up the order, feel free to do so. Heads up! For some of these activities, you might need to think ahead. Read the whole page through at the beginning of your week.

Day One - Prayer

Again, you are invited to write a new prayer to carry with you for the rest of the week. Look to the prayer “Flourishing” on the previous page and read it out loud twice. What words stand out? What might you want to add? In the box, write a few words, then shape those words into a prayerful phrase. Write that phrase on a small piece of paper and carry it with you this final week.



Day Two - Appreciation

Berry appreciation! We have talked about a lot of fruit, but we haven’t specifically talked of grapes! When the Bible mentions figs, often it also mentions vines. Today, think about grapes. Think of the wine/ juice of Communion. Close your eyes and think of the sweetness and the coolness of biting into a ripe grape. What words would you use to describe it?



Day Three - Gratitude

This last week, think about your neighbors. Your situation might be that you don’t really know the people who live near you. Or, maybe you know everyone on the block! Maybe your neighbors are the people you know from groups or clubs you belong to, from church, from mission trips. Who are the people you have in your frequent contacts list on your phone? Who are the people you interact with each week? Today, take a minute to think of your neighborhood, and give thanks. Think of the people you know, and also the people you might like to know. Imagine what you would like your neighborhood to look like, and how restoration and community can come together for God’s earth.



Day Four - Creation

This week, choose a hike or short walk, as you are able. Find again a place to sit outside in the creation, on a rock, a park bench, or outside your home, in the midst of the natural world. Sit quietly, breathe, and experience the outside air and any Holy Spirit breezes. Today, as you breathe in and out, notice the smells, sounds, and experience of simply being part of the creation.

Day Five - Generosity

Share a treat! This last week holds another invitation to share good things. Inside the front cover of this study guide is the recipe for Alona’s chocolate chip cherry cookies. If you want to, bake some to share. You can share them with family and friends, neighbors, teachers, or during fellowship. Or, make/purchase a fruit-y treat to share.



