



Season of Creation 2024

United Methodist
Creation Justice Movement
Worship Team Resources

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Introduction

The beautiful, biblical law of first fruits is that they belong to God. That they are gathered in joy and gratitude. That they are given freely and joyfully, as an expression of God's plenty. And that they are shared by the community.

As the United Methodist Creation Justice Movement Worship Team tasked with preparing resources for celebrating the upcoming Season of Creation (September 1–October 6), we return to the idea of first fruits, especially the fig tree and its fruit, the fig.

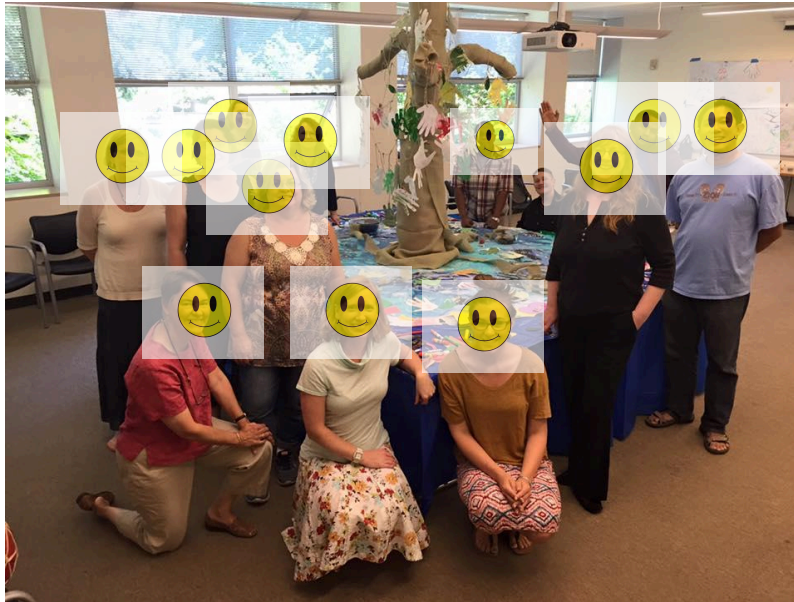
Using the fig tree, we explore biblical stories and teaching, both hopeful and challenging, to better understand the abundance of God and God's desire that we share in it together. As we reach for hope and take action on the climate crisis, we choose to learn from and through the fig tree. Come with us. There is fruitfulness for all.

Worship Space

Because the fig tree is central to the series, consider how to bring that image into your worship space. Perhaps use images of figs and fig trees in your worship slides. Perhaps there are plants or fruits you can bring into the worship space or place on the altar. Consider featuring fruits in

your fellowship time after worship, especially fruits that are native to your geographical area. For those in North America, berries are often a good way to go for native fruits.

Alternatively, you may wish to co-create a “tree” with your congregation in the worship space.



The smiling people pictured here created the tree on the table. First, they painted a paper to look like water. Then they made a hollow trunk and several branches with chicken wire. They hung the branches on the trunk with Zip Ties. They covered the trunk and branches with burlap. In a worship experience, participants were invited to use paper cut outs of handprints to add to the tree their own commitment to be part of the healing and wholeness for all creation.

As an alternative, you might dedicate a bulletin board in the church to the tree. During the worship experience, distribute paper shapes for participants to write on in response to the invitation. Then they can add their paper to the tree on the way out.

If you decide to create a tree in or around your worship space, consider how you might invite congregation members to interact with the tree each week, before, during, or after worship. Some ideas are included in each week’s materials. Children and youth may be interested in helping with this interactive time of worship, although it is appropriate for all ages to participate in ritual action around the tree.

Music Resources

For each week in the series, hymns are suggested to go with the week's texts and theme. In addition to the weekly options, consider these possibilities, which are great for any week in the series:

Upper Room Worshipbook (URW) contains an entire section, "Praising God With All Creation"—any of which would be lovely for this celebration. Here are some particular suggestions:

"Praise with Joy the World's Creator" (URW 73)
"Creation Sings! Each Plant and Tree" (URW 86)
"God, Who Spins the Whirling Planets" (URW 83)
"The Word of God" (URW 78), "O Holy Spirit, Root of Life" (URW 79), and/or "Great Lover, Calling Us to Share" (URW 80). Note that these three hymn texts all are set to the same tune, PUER NOBIS.

In addition, United Methodist worship musicians Jim and Jean Strathdee have written and collaborated on a number of creation care and climate justice-oriented hymns over the years, and have created a "singalong" video resource at their website, strathdeemusic.com. A listing of their "earth care" videos is linked here: <https://strathdeemusic.com/EarthCare.html>. Permission is given to congregations with OneLicense subscriptions to use these in worship, and they can be downloaded for free from this site (please report use to OneLicense). Information on purchase of sheet music is also found there. Favorites from this collection that may particularly relate to this series include:

["Where the Green Will Rise Again"](#)
["Mother Earth, Our Mother Birthing"](#)
["Dance with the Spirit"](#)
["Fields of Praise"](#)
["Healing Water"](#)
["Earth Dreams"](#)

Full list of abbreviations for hymnals:

UMH *United Methodist Hymnal*
FWS *The Faith We Sing*
WS *Worship and Song*
URW *Upper Room Worship*

Threshold Moment Video

As your congregation transitions from gathering into worship, mark the beginning of worship with what is sometimes called a “threshold moment.” Using it consistently week to week throughout the series may be helpful. This [48-second video](#) is provided for you to use possibly for your threshold moments or to include in worship in a variety of ways:

- Consider playing the video just before the opening prayer is read in unison by the congregation.
- Consider playing the video while the congregation, the pastor, or a liturgist reads the opening prayer aloud.
- Consider using the video as an introduction to the opening song.
- Consider asking musicians in the congregation to add their own accompaniment to the video.
- Create your own way to gather round the fig tree to hope and act with Creation.

The Chant

Rev. Laurie Bayen wrote a chant for use with this worship season that may be used in any way it works for your setting.

A sample “full script”—a version you might try with a leader and a choir, or teach to a children’s group, before attempting with the whole congregation. Use of a drum or other rhythm instrument, clapping or marching might help! *Note: The ideal “tempo” is about 108 beats per minute. The underlined syllables denote beats “1” and “3” of a 4-beat measure)*

Leader: This is our sacred task!

People: This is our sacred task!

Leader: To hope

People: To hope

Leader: And act

People: And act

Leader: With all

People: With all

All: Creation!

Leader: To hope

People: To hope

Leader: And act

People: And act

Leader: With all

People: With all

All: Creation!

Leader: To hope

People: To hope

Leader: And act

People: And act

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Leader: And act

People: And act

Leader: With all

People: With all

All: Creation! Leader: To hope

People: To hope

Leader: And act

People: And act

Leader: With all

People: With all

All: Creation!

Leader: This is our sacred task!

All: This is our sacred task!

All: This is our sacred task!

All: Amen!

A version of the [chant in Google Slides format](#) is available for use in worship slides.

Suggestions for use: This chant could begin or end worship, follow the sermon or a time of announcement of opportunities for creation-focused Christian discipleship, or be presented by a choir. It could be taught to a smaller group (maybe as part of a children's sermon), or started slowly the first week and built upon throughout the series.

A [recording of one voice speaking both parts, using left and right speakers is provided as an example](#).

A special challenge and invitation: Imagine a video including faces, voices, and outdoor settings from all over our Connection reciting this pledge together! To participate, record one or more voices reading through the chant in tempo, and submit your recording (audio or video) for inclusion in a video project to be available on the [United Methodist Creation Justice Ministry](#) website (and available for download to share with your congregation). You might get creative about “shooting on location” from your community garden or other outdoor setting. Still photos (such as of folks working in your garden, walking in the woods, or participating in a protest) are also welcome! Please get permission from all participants using a form like the [video release form](#) we provide, or a similar one that your congregation has agreed to use. Copies of the forms you collect do not need to be submitted with the video. The local congregation that submits a video should retain copies of the forms of all participants. Contact Rev. Laurie Bayen at pastorlaurieumc@gmail.com if you would like to join in the fun! **Deadline: September 16, 2024.**

Engaging Children in Worship

There are three basic threads in the Children’s Ideas, below for each week:

- Plant a seed and watch it grow each week, bringing in the themes of each week in the discussion.
- Suggest ways for children to notice ways that the environment changes from week to week, connecting to the themes for the week. Specifically, they will develop the skill of comparing what they see one week with what they remember from the previous week.
- Have the children write words relating to the theme each week on paper shapes and attach them to the tree in the worship space. If you are using the worship planning notes, and creating a tree in the space and having the whole congregation attach leaves, and so forth, to the tree, we suggest you have the children do it with the rest of the congregation, rather than during the children's time. If the worship planning team is not using the worship planning resource, an option would be to create the tree suggested there to use for the children’s time.

In addition to the three threads, each week provides preparation instructions, a repeat-after-me prayer, and extensions that could be used if you have a Sunday school class that can build on the themes introduced in worship or if you provide take-home ideas for families to experience during the week. Some churches may choose to use each thread of these materials differently to fit their context or may select what is most appropriate for the age of children in their congregation.

Sermon Notes/Thematic Arc

Each week, a different author provides a glimpse into the text from their context. The five voices represented on each of the five weeks gives a unique approach to options for a congregation to engage with the theme, the text, and God's word for them that week.

If you are working with all five weeks in the series, in addition to the weekly sermon notes, a thematic arc connects the texts from week to week, which might provide inspiration for preaching as well.

The fig tree is mentioned in many books of the Bible, and 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 are different varieties of figs, and the people of biblical times were agrarian and would know 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 well. And, they were a delicious snack, so popping a few ripe ones in your mouth as you passed along the path was a well-savored activity. The way to save them would be to dry them, but again, they ripened unevenly, so even this was hard to do efficiently in batches.

Fig tree varieties could grow very large, with showy, green, canopies that spread out signaling the passerby to come and 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. The fig tree's shade was a good meeting place, a good place to sit and conduct business, to hear the latest news, and to hold lessons in Torah.

It is little wonder then that the Old Testament readings set the standard for what to expect about fig trees. They are a sign of community, prosperity, and nourishment. They provided shelter, shade, food, and conversation, for all alike. They were a community good, good for everyone. Figs, as with other staple foods, were proof of God's blessing. There can be no complaining when there are figs to be enjoyed.

As says the Prophet Haggai (2:19):

“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.”

As a handful of figs is proof of God's blessing, so an empty hand is a sign of God's displeasure. A greedy or warring population destroys peace and prosperity of the community. Where leaders are unrighteous, the vine withers and the fig bears no fruit. The calls of the prophets include a call to repentance, and the rewards that will flow from that. God is faithful, and where guilt from ill-deeds is forgiven, the land is restored and made green again.

We hear this blessing and these promises 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.”

and Zechariah (3:10):

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

The fig tree travels through the Bible’s first stories, through the Psalms and the Prophets and into the Gospels. When we get to the Gospels, the highest attention is paid to the life of Jesus, with the stories there shaped to help the people of the time understand the trouble that was unfolding in Judea, the hard times to come for the Judeans, the destruction of Jerusalem, and the new life promised in Jesus Christ.

In the Gospels, the stories we receive build on Old Testament teachings and speak to agrarian people. They would understand the promised prosperity of Joel in the fig tree and vine, and the path to peace, as voiced by Micah, where in addition to beating swords into plowshares, God has promised that one day, “All will sit underneath their own grapevines, under their own fig trees,” because “there will be no one to terrify them” (4:4).

In the Gospels, the stories reveal that these earlier visions of peace have been disrupted. As it was with the Assyrians and Babylon, greed and the Roman Empire were rolling in and over the people. The best farmland went to the richest and royal families. For most others hunger, homelessness, and Roman occupation were their lot. In the very Temple in Jerusalem, the High Priests paraded around in flashy clothing and claimed a status and rank of honor that shamed God.

Just a handful of mentions of the fig tree are in the Gospels. A verse in John affirms that the fig tree of Jesus’ time was understood in much the same way as it had always been. In Chapter 1 of the Gospel of John, when Jesus is calling his disciples, we are offered a village scene. When Jesus meets Nathanael, we have a short verse that places Nathanael in the heart of Israel. A

modern equivalent might be if we said of him, “He’s as American as apple pie.” John’s Gospel (1:47-48) says:

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.”

The fig tree is the symbol Jesus chooses to use as his example, even though if Jesus knew him, Jesus could have chosen to associate Nathanael with anything—his clothing, or his hometown. By choosing to highlight the fig tree, Jesus associates Nathanael with village goodness, prosperity, faithfulness, and as a worthy member of this gathering of learners, many already disciples of John the Baptist, talking of the Kingdom together under a shady canopy. The fig tree is still symbolic of the relationship between God, land, and people.

In contrast to John’s “everyday” village scene, from the synoptic Gospels we get a more troubling aspect. The trees in Mark, Matthew, and Luke have failed to bear fruit. The fig tree that is a symbol of the heart, home, peace, and prosperity of Judea in the Synoptics becomes entangled in the story of the Temple’s fall.

In Luke 12:7 Jesus tells the story from a distance, and with an agrarian point of view: “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?”

For Mark and Matthew, their telling puts the fig tree in the middle of Palm Sunday, Passover, and the cleansing of the Temple. From Mark (11:13-14): “Jesus 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!’” And from Matthew (21:18-19): “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!’”

Both Mark and Matthew also tell that the cursed tree then withers and dies. Luke’s story gives a more hopeful ending, that judgment is reprieved for another year. The fig tree with its fruit and canopy, long understood as a sign of community wellbeing and peace in Israel and Judea, in the Synoptics becomes the embodiment of the corruption of Israel. The tree, a symbol that integrates people, land, and Creator, symbolizes the truth of the trouble Jesus and the disciples are dealing with.

Yet while the fig tree in Mark and Matthew at Passover is cursed, it is not eradicated. It is human corruption that has harmed the fig tree, not God. In companion stories in Matthew and Luke, the Gospel writers reassure their listeners that all is not lost: there is hope because the fig tree and the Kingdom of God are intertwined. In the first of two ways, Jesus in Matthew (21:21-22) and Mark (11:20-25), after he has cursed the tree and it has died, teaches his disciples of the power of faith and prayer, a power strong enough to vanquish corruption and throw down the mountains. In the second way, Matthew (24:32-35) and Luke (21:29-33) show Jesus teaching that the fig tree returned to health will one day be a sign of the coming Kingdom.

In the synoptic stories, then, Jesus and the Gospel writers call the reader's attention to the weirdness of a fig tree that has no fruit. The tree that has become corrupted and does not provide food, shelter, and nourishment to the community is cursed and can be thrown down by the power of God. It is also the sign, when returned to health, of returned peace, welcome prosperity, and the coming kingdom.

To return for a minute to the Gospels of Mark and Matthew, it is important to understand the story of the cursed fig tree as one of the stories recorded of Jesus' final journey to Jerusalem. It lines up next to the larger warnings of the downfall of Jerusalem itself. Jesus' assessment of and curse of the malfunctioning fig tree shows the power of the Human One/Son of God—that he knew already that the state was doomed. To the people reading after, and to us reading now, it is a warning of the danger when greed and power march over the poor and the harm that can come to the creation when land and people are exploited and ill-used.

Jeremiah echoes this same tragic note in an earlier time. Jeremiah, like Jesus, tries to warn of the corruption that is destroying the heart of Israel and Judea. Jeremiah too chooses the fruit of the fig tree as the example. This is how you can tell things are going really wrong, Jeremiah proclaims, as he begs his hearers to listen!

The Lord showed me two baskets of figs set in front of the Lord's Temple. One basket was filled with fresh and ripe figs; the other basket was 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." (24:1-7).

Jeremiah might have a similar response were he to view the polluted waterways, the felled forests, the Sixth Great Extinction in our own time, decrying the destruction: "There are no grapes on the vine, no figs on the tree, only withered leaves. They have squandered what I have given them!" (8:13)

His is a voice that rises to call us back to God. Jeremiah's voice joins with the prophets of old, with Jesus, and with the prophets of our time to call us away from further destruction. For we are God's children. What God wants for us is given freely and abundantly, and with great love. God desires the prosperity of God's people and Earth—and the creatures God loves.

These are hard stories because they speak to unrighteous actions that cast harm so wide it brings Jesus himself to Earth to be crucified. They are also stories of great hope! For we do not have to fumble around to figure it out. We only need to pay attention to the current state of things and to take action. We know what to do. In the Letter to the Romans, Paul tells us, "The present suffering is nothing compared to the coming glory" (8:18) and "The whole creation waits

breathless with anticipation” (8:19) as in Christ and by the Spirit we are saved. Our hope is within each of us and all of us right now. The words of Joel, the prophet assures us: “Don’t fear, fertile land; rejoice and be glad, for the Lord is about to do great things!”(2:21)

God is not resting in the using up and selling off of the bounty of creation. In these days of climate change, God is making God’s power known! This is our call to act, for God is with us!

Fruitful Explorations for Sermon Illustrations

- A flourishing community requires flourishing earth. This flourishing is evident when the celebration of abundant fruit and harvest includes the whole community.
 - o (Think of the places where drought is disrupting harvest or places where there are big celebrations when favorite foods ripen.)
- We have the power to take the necessary action we need to throw down the corrupt and restore the land and prosperity.
 - o (Acting with authority from our faith and teachings gives the power to resist the extraction of oil, the spraying of pesticides and herbicides, the reliance on chemical fertilizers and other things that are destructive to earth. Tell of folks in grass roots places who have resisted destructive refineries or water pollution and won!)
- When the balance of the seasons is broken or disrupted, hardship follows—even war and violence. Balance needs to be restored.
 - o (Organizations such as UNICEF, the UN, and UMCOR work to restore communities following disruptions from disasters.)
- Attending to “right times” of the season and community celebrations of harvest and respecting the God-given fruit of fig and vine maintain the wellbeing of the people and the land.
 - o (Encourage the congregation to think about what traditional foods they celebrate and how important the ecosystem is to support those foods and celebrations. How can people during climate change support these important ecosystems?)
- The fig tree that nourishes the community and the wayfarer. A flourishing Israel can be imagined as a flourishing, fruit-abundant fig tree.

o (This teaching connects the land, people, and practices. How can the health of a place be seen in its environment? How are Indigenous people leading the restorative way globally and maybe in your community as well?)

• Jesus's concern with the corruption of Israel is played out in the example of the unproductive fig tree. Neither the fig tree nor the priests are doing what they should be doing, and both will be thrown down.

o (Where do we see the trouble of the climate crisis in our communities? Even as Jesus shows us that harmful behavior has real consequences and must stop, how can we “lift people up” to encourage them and inspire them to take action for “one more year” for renewal and change. Think of all the good that can be done!)

• Recently, the UMC passed a [resolution to care for church lands](#). Can you imagine a place in your church yard where people can gather and feel a sense of holy peace and prosperity. What does “the fig tree” look like in your context? What if you planted a native, fruit-bearing tree in your church yard to commemorate this Season of Creation (one that either offered fruit for people, or birds, as they love first fruits too!)

Devotional Guide

A [devotional booklet](#) is provided to help individuals or groups grow spiritually as they move through the thematic arc in the series. Invitations to growth include daily devotions and weekly spiritual practices. For use in congregations using the worship series, the booklets may be printed on 8.5x11 inch paper in color or black and white and distributed in paper copy or electronically. Individuals may work through the booklet by themselves and move from text to text with the congregation in worship. In addition, small groups may find that a weekly discussion group is valuable to share reflections on the themes and activities throughout the devotional.

Weekly Resources

Week 1: Abundance

Possible Date: 9/1/2024

Focus Scripture: John 1:44-50 and Haggai 2:18-19

Bringing the Theme to Life in the Worship Space

Worshippers could add paper images of figs/fruits to the tree in worship. They might be invited to write on each fruit some indication of God's abundance in their lives. Alternatively, baskets of edible fruits could be placed under the tree for worshippers to pick up and enjoy.

Hymn Suggestions

"I Am Thine, O Lord" (UMH 419)

"Rise Up, O Saints of God" (UMH 576) (note the inclusive language choice)

"Would I Have Answered When You Called" (FWS 2137)

(This song lends itself to creating other reflective lyrics...)

"Step by Step" (WS 3004)

"Come to the Table of Grace" (WS 3168)

"Come Just As You Are," by Joseph Sabolick (CCLI #1189479)

Call to Worship

Do we worship God in exchange for God's gifts of creation?

We worship because God is worthy of praise.

Is creation ours—to take, bless, break, and eat?

We humbly give thanks that we too are part of creation.

May we be not only caretakers, but co-creators.

May we worship the Creator, Redeemer,

and Sustainer of all that exists,

interwoven through our hope and action.

A version of this [Call to Worship is available in Google slides format](#) for inclusion in worship slides.

Engaging Children in Worship

How to Prepare

- Consider making a tree for the worship space.
- If you are using the tree, prepare some fruit-shaped papers with string or tape so they can be attached to the tree. Bring some crayons or markers for writing words as well.
- Write the repeat-after-me prayer you will be saying on one of the fruit-shaped papers so you can attach it after you pray. Here is the prayer:

Holy God,
Thank you for showing us abundance in the world you created.
Teach us to see your abundance all around us.
Amen.

- Consider providing some figs and cut them up for the children to try, or get some fruit that might be native to your area to have them try. Alternatively, bring pictures of figs, fig trees, or other fruit.
- Bring a seed of a plant native to your area, a pot, and soil to plant a seed. Hint: Berries are native to many areas of North America.

Time With Children

Part 1: Planting

- Introduce the theme of figs. The Bible has lots of references to figs. Do you know what a fig is? Have you ever seen one? Have you ever tasted one?
- Explain that a fig tree can produce an abundance of fruit. Ask: Do you know what abundance means? (Help them understand that abundance means having much more than just enough.)
- Open up a fig that you've already cut in half or show a picture of a fig cut in half and point out the seeds. Use the word "abundance" to describe what you see: There's an abundance of seeds in a ripe fig.
- Provide some figs for the children to taste if possible and if they are willing. If you haven't already cut them, slice off part of a fig for each child. If you can't bring a fig, bring another fruit to sample—something that is abundant where you live. Talk about how God provides abundance but in different ways in different places.
- Introduce the idea of native plants, and give examples of what is native in your area. Ask: Have you seen an abundance of fruit on any plants recently? What was it?
- Ask children to assist with planting a seed for a plant native to your area. If possible, have some children add water. Talk about how you will check on the plant in the upcoming weeks.

Part 2: Notice and Compare

- Ask children if they have ever planted other seeds. Introduce the concept of comparison by suggesting that the other seeds might have been smaller or larger than the ones they just planted.
- Ask children if they know of plants around the church or their homes that are bigger than the one they just planted. Suggest that they use all their senses to remember the plants they find.
- Suggest that as children go out from church,, they can take notice of plants growing in or around their home in the next week. Ask if anyone thinks they can take a picture of a plant this week and bring it next week. Remind them that we will follow up next week to find out what they noticed.

Part 3: Interact With the Tree

- Have paper figs or other fruits with strings or yarn or tape attached to them. Ask the kids to name ways they see abundance in the world. If they are able, have them write words that show the abundance that God has given them. If the children have yet to learn to write, help them write the words they express. Provide the opportunity for them to attach the fruits to the tree in the worship space.
- To end the time, say a prayer that is written on a paper fruit, and attach it to the tree. Repeat-after-me Prayer:

Holy God,
Thank you for showing us abundance in the world you created.
Teach us to see your abundance all around us.
Amen.

Ideas for Extending to Sunday School or at Home

- Bring seeds, pots, and soil for all the children to plant a seed of their own. Talk about how a seed grows into a plant. What does the plant need to grow? How big can it get if it grows properly?
- Discuss the places where figs are native. Discuss with the children how the climate is different there than where you live. Invite children to learn what kinds of fruits are native to your area.
- Plan a family or congregational meal that involves foods grown within 100 miles of the church. Let the children help shop for the ingredients at farmers markets.
- The book, *All the World*, by Liz Garton Scanlon, may be appropriate for some readers, depicting children in a family exploring a farm and how the plants and animals on the farm interact and depend on each other. Discussion questions for children are available at <https://storypath.upsem.edu/all-the-world-2/?highlight=bees>. Find a copy in print at a library near you by searching for your zip code at <https://search.worldcat.org/title/892889739>.

Sermon Notes

Throughout this series, each week a Hebrew Scripture text and a Christian Scripture text are paired to illustrate an aspect of the fig tree. Throughout Hebrew Scriptures, the fig tree is a symbol, illustrating God's favor on those who partake of the figs of the tree.

This first week of the series, we begin with texts that both convey the promise of God's favor from the fig tree. In the Haggai text, taken from the end of the second and final chapter of the prophecy, the fig tree is included in a list of plants that have yielded nothing but which are assured to begin to bear soon. The prophet writes of the promise that will come to God's people in the period after the new Temple is built and they have re-established themselves in the place that God has prepared for them. The text from John uses this imagery to describe Jesus inviting Nathaniel to follow him as a disciple, despite the first impression that Nathaniel has of Jesus. Jesus first sees Nathaniel under the fig tree and therefore associates him with a blessing of abundance.

The story of Jesus and Nathaniel may be a place to begin to connect with the stories of figs throughout this series. Jesus calls Nathaniel and associates him with abundance even though Nathaniel seems to have nothing nice to say about Jesus. Perhaps there are those people in our own lives who have seen good things in us, even when we have been difficult or insulting to them. In some cases, these may be role models or mentors who point out that they see something in us that God can use to create fruitful ministry, sometimes before we see it in ourselves. Perhaps we are called to this way of noticing others as well.

Figs are native to the Middle East but are now grown around the world. In the US, most figs are grown in California, but the trees can be grown in almost any state. To understand the importance of the fig tree in middle eastern culture, we might compare figs to berries in the US. Cranberries, blueberries, blackberries, and huckleberries are indicators of the abundance of the land on which we depend. The sweetness of the fruits helps us remember to give thanks to God for the ways that we are nourished beyond our ability to produce the nourishment ourselves. Explore whether there is a local farmer or farm stand whose story can be amplified as an example of interdependence and signs of abundance. Consider organizing a visit to a farm or farmers market to learn more of the stories.

In today's context, the fig might be an indicator of an abundance worldview, that promotes sustainable use of resources such as money, power, people, time, and holding space for innovation. [Crossroads Anti-Racism Organizing and Training](#) describes an abundance world view in contrast to a scarcity mindset, where the default answer is "No" and resources are hoarded and used unsustainably. Teaching values like abundance mindset over scarcity, effectiveness rather than efficiency, "both/and" thinking, and collaboration can help overcome the dominant culture practices that lead to injustice through environmental, racial, and other privileges.

Consider highlighting the story of a local leader who [leads with an abundance mindset](#), who advocates for change based on what is already happening well, and who elicits joy in those whom they lead. The abundance mindset allows leaders to transition away from unsustainable practices like demanding more with less and instead cultivate gratitude for what is, so that new healthy strategies can be employed.

Examples of Abundance Mindset Projects:

[When a Laundromat Becomes a Library](#): PBS Newshour documentary, 2019

[Idah Murithi sharing her gifts of storytelling](#): Mpala Conservation Center in Kenya

Many Native American tribes have a traditional blanket dance. In some, the blanket dance is an opportunity for the community to provide for a person in need through abundance shared. This practice is described in Oskar Hokeah's debut novel, [Calling for a Blanket Dance](#) in which Ever Geimusaddle receives not only material help, but also a welcome and sense of belonging in his network of support.

Pastoral Prayer

Inspired by Psalm 128

Abundant God, God of happiness and blessing! Berrymaking, merrymaking 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.

(Optional, prayers of the people: Hear our prayers, as we raise them to you....)

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. Replant 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.

(Optional, The Lord's Prayer.)

Communion Liturgy

The God of abundance be with you.

And also with you.

Lift up the gift of your hearts.

We lift them up to our God.

Let us give thanks to the bringer of all good things.

It is right to give our thanks and praise.

O God, out of nothingness you gave us this world and all that is in it. With your breath, your words, and your tenderness, you brought this place into being so that it might sing. When there was nothing to know and nothing to see, you knew your intentions for creation and you saw what could be. Out of the depths of your heart you brought forth life, from the smallest of creatures to the expansiveness of the stars. You brought forth everything that brings us joy and goodness, each piece of creation a gift of your very self.

And so, with all your creation, and all the company of the heavens, we sing your praises, and join the song of truth that never ends:

**Holy, holy, holy
God of power and might,
heaven and earth are full of your glory,
Hosanna in the highest.
Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.
Hosanna in the highest.**

Present from before time existed, Christ co-created goodness with you. We celebrate Christ's nurturance of your beloved creation as he holds all things together. When the appointed time dawned, Christ became like us, nurtured in the waters you brought forth in his mother's womb. Baptized by John and anointed with your Spirit, he carried out divine ministry in and among the people you love so dearly.

Recognizing fisherfolks, tax collectors, the outcasts and the marginalized everywhere, Jesus chose to see the goodness and potential in humanity rather than reasons for condemnation. From fig trees to the birds of the air, he taught lessons and truths, drawing on that creation he holds together with you.

When he sat with his friends and loved ones, he shared from the fruits of creation. He took bread made of grain that sprouted from the dirt and said, "Take, eat. This is my body which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me." When the supper was over, he took wine made from grapes off the vine, which also grew from the dirt and said, "Drink this, all of you. This is the blood of the New Covenant, which will be poured out for repair and reconciliation."

And so, in remembrance of these your gracious and holy acts in Jesus Christ, we offer ourselves with singing and jubilation, as we proclaim the mystery of faith:

Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ will come again.

Animating Spirit, guide of our souls and our lives, be present in these gifts of the earth. Draw us in and empower us to be agents of care and compassion in this world we have been given. Make us ever aware of our place among the family of this world. Fill us up with your grace and pour it out on us like a gushing waterfall, that we may be ever present in this world the way it is needed. From earth to sky and everything in between, may we offer ourselves as a gift back to the world and to our Creator, that justice and liberation for all may be realized and recognized. By your Spirit make us one with Christ, one with each other, and one in ministry to all this expansive and beautiful world.

Now, with the confidence of citizens of a world created and sustained by God, let us pray in the way of Christ:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil for thine is the Kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen.

Prayer After Receiving

O God, through this mysterious meal,
you have reminded us that like the grain,
we are scattered, we are buried,
and we rise again in your unconditional love.
Like the juice of the vine, we flow, we ferment,
and we rejoice in your expectation of abundant life
for us and for all creation.

Send us now as ambassadors of your love,
and repairers of the breach.
Send us as light and shade
through service and through praise.
Amen.

Benediction¹

The Lover of our souls invites us;

the flowers are blooming.

It's time for singing;

let's walk out through the valleys

¹ Adapted from Song of Songs 2:13, Priests for Equality. *The Inclusive Bible* (pp. 1540–1541). Sheed & Ward.

and listen to the song of the dove.

The fig trees are setting fruit;

and the air is full of the smell

of grape blossoms.

Arise and come, my beloveds,

come away with me!

A version of this [Benediction is available in Google slides format](#) for inclusion in worship slides.

Week 2: Repentance

Possible Date: 9/8/2024

Focus Scripture: Luke 21:29-33 and Jeremiah 24:1-10

Bringing the Theme to Life in the Worship Space

The tree may have leaves added to it, made of paper with notes about how trees adapt and change given changing climate, changing seasons, and how we also adapt and change as we learn more about how our actions affect those around us, including those with two legs, four legs, six legs, eight legs, roots, or fins.

Hymn Suggestions

“Wounded World That Cries for Healing” (FWS 2177)

“Unsettled World” (FWS 2183)

(This might be a week to especially draw from songs in the list for the season in the Introductory materials above.)

Call to Worship

When we attend to God’s Word in creation,

we are convicted with both gratitude and duty.

Turn our hearts,

O God of great expectations and great mercy.

Turn our hearts.

In the respite of this hour,

make us one with your purpose

that all creation be reconciled to you.

May we worship the Creator, Redeemer,

and Sustainer of all that exists,

interwoven through our hope and action.

A version of this [Call to Worship is available in Google slides format](#) for inclusion in worship slides.

Engaging Children in Worship

How to Prepare

- Keep the seed you planted in a well lit space and give it appropriate water and care throughout the week. Bring it back to worship with you.
- Print and bring a few [pictures of people who are not taking care of their plants well and what they might do differently](#).
- Make paper leaves and attach a string or tape so they can be attached to the tree. Bring crayons or markers to write on them as well.
- If you live in an area where trees change color and leaves fall this time of year, consider choosing three or four colorful leaves to bring in and show the children.
- Write the repeat-after-me prayer for this week on a leaf paper:

Holy God,
Help us learn how to treat your world better.
Forgive us when we don't get it right.
Amen.

Time With Children

Part 1: Planting

- Ask if children noticed plants in the past week. What did they look like? What did they smell like? Did they have anything edible growing on them? What do they need to grow?
- Bring in the plant you planted last week. Talk about whether it's growing. Use questions like: Has it started to grow? If not, did we fail to water it, or does it need more water? Do you need to do something different to help it grow? What does it need to grow? Maybe it doesn't have enough light? If it will have blooms, it will likely need to be outdoors in order to be pollinated.
- If you have brought colorful leaves, show them to the children and ask if they know why the trees leaves change color. (accept any answer, including getting ready for cold weather, less sunlight so using other enzymes besides chlorophyll to convert energy for plant use, so the branches don't get too heavy with ice that they fall off in winter, etc.) Point out that color is one of the ways that trees change every year and turn toward what is happening for them next.

Part 2: Notice and Compare

- Introduce today's theme of repentance. Repentance means turning around; turning away from whatever is harmful. It's like the big change that trees go through in the fall, turning toward what is next and turning away from where they were before.
- Show the children the pictures of examples of not caring for plants well.

- Ask: What are the ways we might need to change or adjust our behavior to help plants? What plants do we encounter outside our church? What do they need to survive? Is there anything we can do to help? (don't litter, use less fossil fuels, don't trample them...)
- Help children connect by explaining that sometimes when we change our behavior to make something better, we call it repentance. Ask them if they can think of any examples of times when they needed to change their behavior or someone had to show them ways to do something better (throwing a baseball, washing dishes after dinner, writing with a pencil, etc.)
- This next week, ask children to notice ways that it would be helpful to change behavior. Depending on the age of your children, you may want to suggest they consider how easy or hard it would be to change that behavior and even brainstorm together what would make it more realistic.

Part 3: Interact With the Tree

- Invite children to say aloud any ways they'd like to ask for God's help changing behavior, if they are comfortable voicing their ideas. If they are able, give them the opportunity to write words about these requests on a leaf to ask God for forgiveness or repentance in relation to climate change or a personal experience. If the children have yet to learn to write, help them write the words they express. Then attach the leaf to the tree in the worship space.
- To end the time, say a prayer that is written on a paper leaf, and attach it to the tree. Repeat-after-me Prayer:

Holy God,
Help us to learn how to treat your world better.
Forgive us when we don't get it right.
Amen.

Ideas for Extending to Sunday School or at Home

- To engage more with the concept of repentance as a change in direction, play a game with children that requires changes of direction. Depending on the age of your children and the room where you meet, you could consider card games like Uno (when the reverse direction cards are played), board games like Candyland (when a card with an image rather than a color is played) or Sorry (where it is possible to roll a backward number or return to home base), instruction following games like Simon Says or Red Light Green Light (where the leader's instructions or actions result in going multiple directions), or ball games like dodgeball, or basketball (where the ball dictates the direction the players move).
- Find a recipe for homemade fig newtons, fruit salad with figs, or another fruit recipe, collect the ingredients, and have the children make them. This would also be a good activity for Zoom worship. Here are some links to some recipes:
<https://www.dessertfortwo.com/homemade-fig-newtons-recipe/>

<https://www.seriousseats.com/homemade-fig-newtons-recipe>

<https://feastingonfruit.com/gluten-free-fig-bars-recipe/>

<https://veggiekinsblog.com/2020/10/31/healthy-vegan-fig-bars/>

- Find a recipe for some other treat using fruit that is native to your area, and have the children make them. Perhaps cherry pie or peach cobbler.
- The book, *Coming Home*, by Floyd Cooper, about the life of Langston Hughes and his desire to find something that felt like home describes several examples of a life that changed, turned, and influenced others to live lives that advocated for justice in a variety of ways. Heroes who worked on the Underground Railroad, who wrote poetry, and who worked for civil rights, are part of the story. Near the beginning of the book, there are also some beautiful descriptions of Langston encountering natural environments in Kansas that might be inspiration for children to imagine how they encounter the natural environment. You can hear the book being read aloud at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x1ggwdMreIQ>. Find a paper copy in a library near you here: <https://search.worldcat.org/title/28798447>.

Sermon Notes

Regarding the movie *Groundhog Day* (1993), critic Sophie Collins wrote: “In many ways, then, *Groundhog Day* is a journey from mindlessness to mindfulness, from selfishness to selflessness. Mindfulness allows us to be more aware of how we go about our daily lives, of our own actions and decisions. We can become more aware of the choices and suffering of others around us, effectively allowing us to break free from the rut we've fallen into. Through it, we can switch off our default settings and become something more than automatons.”

Luke 21:29-33 invites us to switch off our default settings. It is calling us to repentance, to change our mind and to be like Jesus. Hymn #560 “Help Us Accept Each Other” (UM Hymnal) uses four key phrases as guides to daily life in Christian community:

- Help us accept each other as Christ accepts us...
- Teach us, O Lord, your lessons as in our daily life...
- Let your acceptance change us, so that we may be moved...
- Lord, for today's encounters with all who are in need...

Words powerfully shape our attitudes, beliefs, and faith. In Luke 21:29-33 Jesus uses a parable of fig trees growing green and leafy—indicating to the vinedresser that they are about to give fruit—to explain how we will know when God's kingdom is close.

The kingdom of God is a place where God reigns. So, when Jesus says that the kingdom is near, what he means is that his reign is at hand; that you are going to see what God's kingdom looks like in the life and ministry of Jesus.

The kingdom announcement, therefore, signaled the renewing of creation. Human beings are the created co-creators, which firstly means that humans were created (evolutionary) by God

and secondly that the essence of the human being is determined by the specific character of God (Phillip Hefner 1998).

We are called to embrace the character of God: He is also gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, and abounding in love and faithfulness. I suggest reading the Hymn #454 UMH "Open My Eyes, That I May See" as a personal prayer as our way to change our mind. Repentance.

Jesus makes it clear that the people needed to change their minds about how a person becomes part of God's kingdom. Their belief in their own righteousness was insufficient, as God's standards demanded more than just their heritage and deeds. Instead, God required that the people have a genuine, internal righteousness, which was not in their possession at the moment but it is possible to own when we embrace the reign of God. Thy kingdom Come.

Pastoral Prayer

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! Hear our prayers of hope and repentance as we lift them to you.

(Optional, prayers of the people: We lift our prayers to you from our congregation...)

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 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.

(Optional, The Lord's Prayer)

Benediction²

Those who tend the fig tree will eat its fruit.

Those who watch for Adonai will be honored.

Just as water reflects one's face,

the heart reflects one's true self.

May our hope reflect God's action,

May our action reflect God's hope.

A version of this [Benediction is available in Google slides format](#) for inclusion in worship slides.

² Adapted from Proverbs 27:18-19, Priests for Equality. The Inclusive *Bible* (p. 1526). Sheed & Ward.

Week 3: Restoration

Possible Date: 9/15/2024

Focus Scripture: Mark 11:12-14 (optional 22-25) and Micah 4:3-4

Bringing the Theme to Life in the Worship Space

This week, soil may be added around the tree and the soil around the tree may be “watered” with paper water droplets added around its roots or falling on it from above as rain would fall. Another option would be to insert butcher paper under the tree and invite participants to draw or paint soil, rocks, mountains, and deep roots from the tree in the soil. Possibly some would want to add water drops, waves, springs, and fountains on the paper around and below the tree. This could come with an invitation to consider how our lives might be forces for restoration like the soil holds water and nutrients that restore a tree.

Hymn Suggestions

“When Our Confidence Is Shaken” (UMH 505) (Note that this tune is likely less familiar to many congregations; you might try CWM RHONDDA as in UMH 127 for a more familiar tune in a major key, or PICARDY as in UMH 296 for a more familiar tune in a minor key.)

“Let Us Plead for Faith Alone” (UMH 385) (an alternate tune might also be helpful here—perhaps CANTERBURY as in UMH 355)

“Behold a Broken World” (UMH 426) (alternate tune suggestions: AZMON as in UMH 57; ST. AGNES as in UMH 175; ST. ANNE as in UMH 117 and ST. PETER as in UMH 549)

“For the Healing of the Nations” (UMH 428)

“O God of Every Nation” (UMH 435)

“O Day of Peace That Dimly Shines” (UMH 729) (alternate tune suggestion: SWEET HOUR as in UMH 496)

Call to Worship

Hope is an action word, O God.

We hope for your future.

We hope for your children.

We hope to restore our rightful place

in your creation.

May our hearts and minds and actions

be transformed in our gathering today—

and our worship be an act of reconciliation
with our roots and with your dreams.

**May we worship the Creator, Redeemer,
and Sustainer of all that exists,
interwoven through our hope and action.**

A version of this [Call to Worship is available in Google slides format](#) for inclusion in worship slides.

Engaging Children in Worship

How to Prepare

- Make water droplets out of paper and add a string or tape so they can be attached to the tree. Gather crayons or markers to write on them.
- Bring the plant you planted in week one.
- Write the repeat after me prayer for this week on a water-droplet-shaped paper.

Holy God,

Thank you for the ways you restore us and restore the world.

Teach us ways to help in that process

so the plants may be restored and be abundant.

Amen

Time With Children

Part 1: Planting

- The plants we have been talking about that are abundant aren't always abundant. They need time for restoration in order to bear fruit again after they have produced fruit. Talk about what restoration means.
- If you planted a seed on week one, talk about whether that is growing (or not). What is helping it change from a seed to a plant?

Part 2: Notice and Compare

- Ask: What did you notice this past week on the theme of repentance? Did you discover behaviors that would benefit from changing? If you change them, will it help with restoration of something? What is that something?
- Explain that we need to rest, to eat, and to drink water to restore ourselves and give ourselves energy. Plants need that too. Ask: Can you think of examples of when you needed restoration?
- This next week encourage children to notice if there are some plants that seem to be choking off other plants. Ask: What are those plants?

- Introduce the idea of invasive plants that grow really well, sometimes so well that they crowd out other plants. Consider sharing an example that is a problem in your area. More information on invasives can be found here: <https://www.si.edu/stories/escape-invasives>.
- If there are well-known invasive species in your area (like blackberries in the Pacific Northwest or Kudzu in the South), talk about how they sometimes keep the native plants from growing abundantly, and that it is helpful to remove them in order for the native plants to be restored. Sometimes that's hard because, for example, blackberries are delicious, yet they are harmful to the environment in the Pacific Northwest.

Part 3: Interact With the Tree

- Have the children say aloud and write words on a paper water droplet that remind them of how things were restored or changed in their school, home, church, or community in relation to personal need or climate. If the children have yet to learn to write, help them write the words they express. Then have them attach the water droplet to the tree in the worship space.
- Invite them to consider how God might have been involved in the change they identify. If the changes the children identify are not about restoration and are instead about challenges they face, help them understand that God is not causing the challenges, but instead that God is supporting them through addressing the challenges with the help of the adults in their lives.
- Say the prayer that is written on a water droplet, and attach it to the tree in the worship space. Repeat-after-me Prayer:

Holy God,
Thank you for the ways you restore us and restore the world.
Teach us ways to help with restoration
so the plants may be restored and be abundant.
Amen

Ideas for Extending to Sunday School or at Home

- Do some research on native and invasive plants and animals in your area. Have a discussion about those species, helping children understand that invasive species are sometimes released or planted in an area to solve a problem or to enhance the beauty of an area, but due to their ability to reproduce without constraints, they cause local species to fail to thrive.
- Bring the book, *The Water Hole*, by Graeme Base. Use this link for some discussion questions: <https://storypath.upsem.edu/the-water-hole/>. To find a paper copy of the book in a library near you, search your zip code at: <https://search.worldcat.org/title/45558818>.
- For youth, consider organizing a volunteer opportunity to help with removing an invasive species and/or maintaining a local trail in your area. Alternatively, watch a documentary like *Cane Toads: An Unnatural History*, about the toads that were introduced into the

Australian farmlands to control agricultural pests and have now become pests themselves. To find a DVD copy in a library near you, enter your zip code here: <https://search.worldcat.org/title/47827573>.

Sermon Notes

The Worship Series

This is Week Three of the Season of Creation worship series, and the focus is Restoration. The overall thematic arc of this series is an exploration of first fruits and fruitfulness. In a nutshell, this series explores how good it is when human behaviors support the harmony of nature and the abundant creation God intends. Human, plant, and animal communities all flourish in that abundance. But, when disharmony comes, that abundance and so much more are threatened.

Our Bible offers many examples of times of peace and prosperity with a perspective on the people and the land. The Bible also offers lament and anger when the peace is broken and prosperity is threatened or lost.

This week we again have texts that juxtapose peace and prosperity with suffering and strife. Through the story in Mark 11, when Jesus curses the fig tree, we are learning about much more than missing figs. The story gives us a metaphor for what is happening in Judea at the time, and, spoiler alert, everything is out of whack. This story is a teaching moment to help us see the problem, then learn what we can do about it.

The Fig Tree Explained

Mark 11 is a classic “stump the pastor” text. Reading and re-reading this story can sometimes only increase confusion. We can definitely understand that Jesus wanted a way-side snack, but— why was he so mad about the lack of fruit when it “wasn’t the season for figs”? To explore the answer, we can delve into the layers of the text.

First, a little botany. Real, living fig trees in Jesus’ time would have produced two crops of figs every year. The first crop, the first figs, come early with the first shoots of spring. These first figs are now known as either *Breba* or *Taqsh*. *Breba* is the first fruit of the fig tree and sometimes *breba* will emerge on a branch before any leaves at all. Usually, as the very first *breba* grow, you see the very first baby leaves growing, as well. These first figs are not as sweet as the second later crop, but are still good to eat.

Next, a little social context. A Judean traveler in spring could absolutely expect to go up to a fig tree and find some *breba* to eat to take the edge off their appetite. When a traveler saw these first leaves beginning to grow on otherwise bare branches, they would be very glad! This was the sign that the first figs would be there! A hungry traveler would stride on over for a snack.

That was exactly what Jesus did. Jesus sees the fig tree, and it is already in full leaf! Jesus may have been excited by the expectation of a big crop of first fruit! But what happens instead is that the tree has played a sort of trick. It looked like it had produced a bumper first crop of 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. In the honor/shame culture of Judea, this wasn't so much about personal disappointment as it was a public insult. Jesus had a right to expect fruit. When he didn't find any, it was as if the tree had pulled one over on him and shamed him. Jesus, in response, ensured that the tree had its last laugh.

Adding some spiritual context. Remember also that at this time in this place the spiritual world was considered very much alive. It is hard to get that in our English translations of the Bible, but we see that in stories of demon possession and the temptation in the wilderness. At this time people believed in a much more spiritually animated world. Trees, rivers, plants, and animals were thought to have allegiance to different spirits or powers and were possessed by different spirits. This is one part of the origin as to why we say grace over our food at mealtimes! We are praying to God to realign the spirit of the food to God, so it will be good for us. In this spiritual order, the fig tree without fruit showed itself not only to be physically out of balance, but also spiritually out of balance, since God had commanded that the creation "be fruitful and multiply."

Now we come to the metaphorical aspect. Here is a tree that has sucked up nutrients and sunlight. Instead of putting all that goodness into producing good fruit—as God had created it to do—it had instead just indulged itself. In reading the story of the fig tree in full leaf without fruit, we can hear echoes of Jesus's criticism of the Jerusalem priests who paraded around in fine robes. Yet while showy, they were fruitless. What God did they worship?

The fig tree, with all that leafy canopy but no fruit, was all out of order. This tree was masquerading as fruitful, but it was taking up what was good to use only for itself. It was giving nothing back. The metaphor of the fully-leafed fig tree shows us that things are completely out of balance. Jesus then takes decisive action to correct the problem.

Let's return to the stumper question, what does it mean, "not the season for figs"? In running this question down, the short answer is, it was not the season for figs because this isn't about seasons at all. The translation "season" sends us off in the wrong direction. We get stuck in botany while Mark is talking about something much bigger than that.

Language Insights

The challenges of working with different languages in biblical study are ongoing. We are humbled to think that these stories, first spoken in Aramaic, then written largely in Koine Greek, come to us English speakers through English translations. With humility, I offer these insights.

"It wasn't the season for figs." The word we translate as "season" in our English Bibles is the Greek word *Kairos* / *καῖρός*. While the word *Kairos* can absolutely mean a season of the year, it is a much bigger word than that. It means at its heart "a period of time." Generally, there is some extra, deeper, or unquantifiable time association. It's not simply an hour, or a day, or summertime. *Kairos* means some measure or proportion of time with some point or importance. The first listeners would know this.

Mark doesn't mention spring or summer in this first part of the story. He brings the metaphor down much more pointedly. The language tells us that Jesus notices a *particular* tree. He can see *the leaves from afar*. He heads over, we know he was hungry. But what he discovers is that for all that show of leaves from far away, it leads to nothing. And in his curse, Mark hits us with the *big* word for time: *Kairos*. It is not simply about yearly seasons. In using the word *kairos*, Mark links us to something much bigger. We pick up the rest of the story as it continues a few verses later, 11:20-25, and then in Mark 13:28-29.

The word for summer, the actual season, *is* used in the wider story. This choice is part of what throws us off for translating verse 13. The word *Theros* / *θέρος*, summer, shows up in Mark, Matthew, and Luke in the part of the story where the fig tree has died and the disciples are caught up in awe to see it. When Jesus explains to them what happened, the word "summer" comes in. Jesus incorporates a teaching, using the word "summer" (*theros*), to juxtapose the smaller earth season with the big cosmic time, *kairos*, of the coming Kingdom of God.

All this to say, that if it were as simple as "not the yearly season for figs," Jesus and Mark could have just said that. Instead, we get a lesson about God's time, *kairos*, in a reinforcing metaphor for the fall of Jerusalem and the coming Kingdom of God. Mark is talking about big, cosmic things. This story is part of the foretelling of the Messiah's return and the fall of Jerusalem. By using the word *kairos*, Mark builds import and anticipation, and he clues us in.

Restoration / Micah

The theme within a theme this week is Restoration. When it comes to incorporating this theme into worship, the hope is that we can speak to the truth of the challenges we face and how we got here, as well as what we can do next. Importantly, we are also called to preach into the hope, the possibility, and the surety that God is with us and strengthening us for the work we are called to do.

Mark is a sturdy and strict text. It speaks of warnings, and the corruption of the spiritual, political, and economic realities in Jesus's time. The parallels between the Micah reading and the Mark reading are evident. While Mark gives us our beginning place—the fall to come, Micah shows us our landing place—where peace, prosperity, and the restored fig tree are found.

A Final Summation

We as God's people know, just by reading our biblical histories, that we have faced and overcome tremendous suffering and peril many times before. In reflecting on the words of our Holy Book, we can see, hear, and know that God is calling us to a new place, to a new way of being community together, and to a restored world.

Mark and Micah read together show us the path forward. Though it will be hard, God is still God. God will throw down the corrupt and redeem the people. We are the disciples who marvel at the teaching from Mark that we have the power by faith to make things right. In humility we receive the teaching in Micah that balance can and will be restored.

We will continue to be God's people. In our courage in the face of injustice and climate change, we know our efforts toward restoration will flourish. "All will sit underneath their own grapevines, under their own fig trees, and no one will be afraid."

That'll Preach! Topics and Stories for the Sunday Message

I pulled out three potential directions for bringing the big themes from Mark to the here-and-now on this good planet Earth. Those three are 1) The food industry and restorative farming, 2) Rewilding and restoring the natural world, and 3) Restoring balance to our own churchyards.

1. The Food Industry and Restorative Farming

- **The challenge:** Food conglomerates are depleting soils and biodiversity resulting in destruction of nature and creation of a system that leaves too many hungry and undernourished. With our food systems out of balance both for plants, soils, and human need, how might the lack of fruit on the fig tree be like the unbalanced food system we are currently all relying on?
 - [Food, Climate and Nature FAQs. An explainer on regenerative food practices across forests, farms and seas. Plus, how you can support food systems that heal the planet.](#) This is great! And it can get you started. From The Nature Conservancy.
 - [How will climate change affect agriculture?](#) From Oxfam.
 - [Global health and environmental costs of food industry are \\$10tn a year](#) From *The Guardian*.
- **Paths for Restoration:** Restoration of our food systems might look like support of justice for farmers and farm workers, a more equitable food system where everybody eats, and support for restorative farming in all possible places, especially for local small-holder farmers. We can develop food systems that can be sustaining, equitable and nourishing.
 - [Cultivating prosperity in South Dallas through innovative urban farming. Restorative Farms](#), founded by Southern Methodist University faculty and partners, this program is tackling food disparities and driving economic opportunity.
 - [Agriculture Unions, With Church's Support, Fight Uphill Battle For Farmworkers' Rights](#), A story of dignity for farmworkers, from OSV News (Catholic perspective).
 - [Faith fills more than a spiritual void for California's migrant workers. The church has long played a role in the fight for justice for farmworkers.](#) This article includes a lot of photographs, from *National Geographic*.
 - [Growing rice in Louisiana: A path to justice, for Black farmers](#), from the *Christian Science Monitor*.
 - [The farmers restoring Hawaii's ancient food forests that once fed an island.](#) An Indigenous perspective from *The Guardian*.
 - [Farm-to-table food makes school lunch a lesson](#), an adorable story from *The Wilson Times*, North Carolina.

2. Rewilding and Restoring the Natural World

- **The Challenge:** The loss of natural places has led to a crisis of biodiversity, from the soils, to the streams, and more. Loss of nature impacts ecosystems and sets all living things out of balance. Have we been showy with our lives and our consumption, without producing the fruit of good stewardship? What does deforestation and pollution together with climate change mean for us as Christians and stewards of creation?
 - [World must rewild on massive scale to heal nature and climate, says UN. The 'decade on ecosystem restoration' launches with a call for 'imagination' and action on never-before-seen scale](#), from *The Guardian*.
 - [During COP15, Catholic activists urge action to protect biodiversity](#), from Earthbeat, a Project of *National Catholic Reporter*. [COP15](#) is an international meeting that specifically addresses the biodiversity crisis. As the name suggests, there have been 15 of these global meetings. (The coming COP28 is a different global meeting.)
 - [Abandoned Lands: A Hidden Resource for Restoring Biodiversity. Abandoned farmland has been increasing, with a billion acres — an area half the size of Australia — lost globally. Ecologists are increasingly pointing to the potential of these lands and of degraded forests as neglected resources for rewilding and for capturing carbon](#), from *Yale Environment 360*.
- **Paths for Restoration:** What can we do to restore nature? The good news in this is that humans have the capacity to truly be the stewards God calls us to be. We can rewild natural spaces to rebuild ecosystems and support pollinators and birds and fish. We can be a restoration people in repairing streambeds, replanting mangroves, and protecting our forests and aquifers.
 - [Rewilding 101: Everything You Need to Know](#), from *EcoWatch*.
 - [How a dandelion can hold back a flood: Initiating the butterfly effect for good](#), from *National Geographic*.
 - [Six global success stories on how rewilding key species can rebalance ecosystems](#), from One Earth. This is a quick look at six stories, you can google each of these stories to learn more.
 - [Cities are planting trees. Why not make them fruit trees?](#) from Grist. This article speaks to restoration and fruit trees!
 - ['Planting a tree is hope in action': the people regenerating urban habitats and growing community](#). A story from Australia from *The Guardian*.
 - September 21 is a day of action to endorse the Fossil Fuel Non Proliferation Treaty (FFNPT). [Learn more](#) and sign a faith letter in support of phasing out of fossil fuels.

3. Restoring balance to our own churchyards.

- **The Challenge:** It is easier to see the imbalance of nature in spaces far away from our own lives. Yet what about our church properties? How has your church property been out of balance? Is it welcoming to pollinators or does it instead have paved parking lots and lawns. Those things are showy. But are they faithful?
 - [The parish parking lot: Too big and too empty, too much of the time](#), from *America: The Jesuit Review of Faith and Culture*.

- [Column: No Mow May should be 'No Spray May': Let's stop abusing Mother Earth](#), from Palm Beach, Florida. A story that details some of the harms of a green lawn.
- [Richmond hopes Church Lands Use legislation will “restore the harmony in God’s plan”](#) from the United Methodist Creation Justice Movement. To address the stewardship of churchyards, creation care advocate Kim Richmond wrote legislation that passed at the recent UMC General Conference.
- **Paths for Restoration:** The good news here is that with so many people of faith seeking to be better stewards, we can learn to prize native things in their right season and make sure our sacred grounds are supporting the creation as God intended it.
 - [Local synagogues and churches rewilding to welcome migratory flocks and other creatures](#), from *Second Wave in Southwest Michigan*.
 - [Church’s Values Shine Through in New Eco-Friendly Parking Lot Design](#), from Mississippi Watershed Management Organization.
 - [Black Church Food Security Network](#), “We co-create Black food ecosystems anchored by Black churches working in partnership with Black farmers and other organizations.” A lot of stories on their blog.
 - Learn more about [Church in the Wild](#), which is United Methodist affiliated, and the [Wild Church Network](#), which is not the same, but also awesome and this page also includes stories from Wild Churches.
 - [Church Trades Lawn for Garden to Help Fight Drought](#), from Sojourners.
 - [Could churches be prime locations for EV charging stations? One company thinks so](#), by Religion News Service. While EV charging isn’t a return to nature, it might still support environmental goals, perhaps specifically if the church is in a place that would be underserved otherwise.
 - [Engaging diverse communities in building healthier habitats and neighborhoods](#), from National Wildlife Federation. The NWF site includes stories and information about their Sacred Grounds grants.

Photos of *Breba*—the First Fig Fruits.

This article will give you [a good overview](#) about the fig tree. These photos show how *Breba*, these first figs, grow as a “first crop” of figs even before, and alongside, the very first leaves of the spring season.

These first three images show *breba* best, *these three photos below are all copyright protected*. I contacted the photographers to ask permission, but I have not yet heard anything back. As such, you *cannot use them* in worship or reprint them. I am including the links here so that as you prepare your message, you can see them. And, if I do hear back from any of these photographers, I will update this entry.

- <https://www.flickr.com/photos/21482301@N05/27709727708/> In this image you can see the leaves are only just starting. In the background, you can see the other branches of the tree with just the first shoots for leaves.

- <https://www.flickr.com/photos/oric32/8725323060/> This photo shows a few more leaves are coming in, but look how many *brebas*!
- <https://www.flickr.com/photos/44248106@N08/49751825591> Then there is this one that shows that the *breba* can and do arrive before any leaves at all.

You *can* use this image, linked below. This image also shows *breba*, this one is licensed for creative commons use, so when/if you use this one, you must include the correct attribution (Photo by Paul Byrley CC BY 2.0)

- <https://www.flickr.com/photos/97504280@N00/444278079/> This close up shows a few *breba*. You can see that this branch has only new leaf shoots. The photographer notes also that this first *breba* crop was lost to frost, which is what can happen when the Mediterranean fig tree is grown in colder climates. Photo by Paul Byrley CC BY 2.0

These next images are from Wikipedia, so they are okay to use with appropriate credit. Unfortunately the images are such that while you can see the early stage of seasonal growth, you can't see any *breba* on the first two. Still, you can see how bare the tree still is when the *breba* are present.

- <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Fuguier.jpeg> this image shows the tree just coming into leaf. Unfortunately, it is hard to see any *breba*.
- <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Feigenbaum.JPG> this image also shows the tree coming just into leaf. Again, you cannot see the *breba*.
- [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:It_has_only_a_few_days..._\(4467525555\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:It_has_only_a_few_days..._(4467525555).jpg) this image shows the *breba*, but not the tree.

Pastoral Prayer

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. Hear us!

(Optional, prayers of the people: Listen to our prayers as we call to you, now....)

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 forests. For we are your very own. We will be a restoration people, for your glory, for your kingdom, and for this time. Amen.
(Optional, The Lord's Prayer.)

Benediction³

When weapons are transformed into tools for flourishing,
all creation will thrive.

Send us forth to care—

**O Gardener of the cosmos—
for your fruits of fidelity.**

For peace is not merely
the absence of conflict,
but the presence of hope.

**Make of us, O God,
instruments of your universal peace.**

A version of this [Benediction is available in Google slides format](#) for inclusion in worship slides.

³ Adapted from Micah 4:3-4, Priests for Equality. *The Inclusive Bible* (p. 1092). Sheed & Ward.

Week 4: Trust

Possible Date: 9/22/2024

Focus Scripture: Matthew 21:18-22; 24:32-35 and Joel 2:21-24

Bringing the Theme to Life in the Worship Space

A bird bath may be added near the tree. The bird bath could be connected to or built from your baptismal font if you would like to invite congregation members to remember their baptism and the trust in God that is part of the witness in the baptismal vows, although the bird bath can also just be a bird bath and not related to baptism if you prefer.

During worship, birds and bird nests may be added to the tree or the bird bath to symbolize the ways that winged creatures trust God for protection and sustenance. Paper shapes or stickers can be affixed to the tree or pipe cleaners or origami birds could be fashioned into winged creatures and attached with twist ties for a 3D component to the co-created worship aid. There may come with the addition of birds an invitation to experience trust in God, without giving up hope or agency, because our abilities and concept of self-sufficiency are inadequate to address the global emergencies caused by climate change.

Hymn Suggestions

“Depth of Mercy” (UMH 355)

“Come All of You” (UMH 350)

“There’s a Wideness in God’s Mercy” (UMH 121)

“Let Us Plead for Faith Alone” (UMH 385)

“Seek Ye First” (UMH 405)

“*Una Espiga*” (Sheaves of Summer) (UMH 637)

Call to Worship

We are lost.

We are lost in the enormity

of beauty and brokenness

of your creation.

We are small.

We are small in comparison

to the tasks and duties

of stewarding your creation.

We trust.

We trust that you have provided

all that we need for thriving

along with your creation.

A version of this [Call to Worship is available in Google slides format](#) for inclusion in worship slides.

Engaging Children in Worship

How to Prepare

- Cut bird shapes out of paper and add a string or tape so they can be attached to the tree. Bring crayons or markers so they can be written on.
- Add a birdbath to your tree in the worship space. Consult with your pastor about how much your birdbath may resemble a baptismal font and what their preference is about possible resemblance. Some may want you to keep the birdbath away from the font to avoid confusion. Alternatively, some pastors may want to explore the ways that baptism is a call toward trust in God and might welcome the use of the baptismal font in the children's moment and invite children to interact with water in the font as they talk about trusting God, both for people and for birds.
- Bring the plant you planted on week one.
- If you plan to use the USDA zone tracker to show how conditions for planting have changed due to climate change, print those maps or bring a laptop with internet access.
- Write the repeat-after-me prayer on a bird-shaped paper:

Holy God,
We are thankful that we can trust you.
We trust that you take care of the world.
Teach us to be trustworthy.
Amen

Time With Children

Part 1: Planting

- If you planted a seed on Week One, look to see how it's doing. We trust that the seed, given the right conditions, has what it needs to turn into a plant.

Part 2: Notice and Compare

- Ask: What did you notice this past week? Did you discover any plants that appeared to be damaging other plants?

- Introduce the theme for this week of Trust with questions like: What does it mean to be trustworthy? (help children express the idea that trustworthy people are safe and encourage others to be fully who they are.)
- Consider a conversation that invites children to reflect personally on trust with these questions: Who do you trust? (family members, community members, teachers, other leaders) Why do you trust them? How do they help you?
Note that if you have children who have experienced abuse or who have other trust issues, this question may be triggering for them. If you don't know your children well or suspect that there are unaddressed trust issues in your congregation, consider saving this question for a time when children are more at ease and able to express their needs around trust.
- Return to the world of plants by explaining that different kinds of plants need different conditions to grow. That's why there are different kinds of plants that grow abundantly in different parts of the world. Some of those things are changing because of climate change. If you have older children/youth, you could discuss the United States Department of Agriculture map that shows which plants grow where in the US. If you type in a zip code in the US, you will see at least two descriptor zones, which are being updated because the climate is changing. The map is located here: <https://planthardiness.ars.usda.gov/>. If you are outside the US, a zip code like 98112 will demonstrate the principle.
- Help children connect these ideas to their faith by stating that we trust that God will provide what plants need to grow. Can you think of what plants need to grow that God provides? (rain, sun, soil, pollinators) If children are unfamiliar with pollinators, this might be a time to help them understand that pollen has to move from one plant to another and usually that happens on the legs and bodies of bugs. If you read *All the World* on Week One, you might refer to it to point out how the flowers relied on the bees.
- Depending on the age of your children, you may want to remind them that climate change is hindering the ability for plants to rely on God's trustworthiness in some places because there is more drought, more frequent and more intense storms, and more wildfires. We know that God is still trustworthy and we also can help God by decreasing our impact on climate change. Can you think of any ways we can reduce our impact on climate change? (ride bikes and walk more, eat foods grown locally, use electric appliances in areas where the electric grid is supplied from mostly renewable resources, and buy less plastic).
- Invite children this next week to notice the trees that provide protection. Inspire their curiosity with questions like: Do people seek shade under them? Are there any other places people seek shelter?

Part 3: Interact With the Tree

- Have the children say aloud and write words on their bird-shaped paper that relates to how they have trusted God in their school, home, church, or community in relation to personal experience or in nature. If they are still learning to write,

help them record the words they say on the papers. Then have them attach the bird to the tree or birdbath near the tree (if you have one) in the worship space.

- Say the prayer that is written on a bird-shaped paper and then attach it to the tree in the worship space. Repeat-after-me prayer:

Holy God,
We are thankful that we can trust you.
We trust that you take care of the world.
Teach us to be trustworthy.
Amen

Ideas for Extending to Sunday School or at Home

- Have the children make origami birds. Instructions can be found online, for example here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9_C2DpD7EIM or here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zW8DkZl1fbo>. Discuss how plants and birds depend on one another for existence.
- Read *The Curious Garden*, by Peter Brown. From a review on the website [Storypath](#): “Liam decides to take care of a struggling garden he encounters in his city, where there is no greenery, trees, or gardens. As Liam works to restore the garden, the illustrations become more and more colorful, drawing more people in and bringing life back to his city. Similar to how Liam’s city was transformed, our lives too can be transformed when we choose to trust in God.”

To find a paper copy in a library near you, search here:

<https://search.worldcat.org/title/243777496> for your zip code. Audio recordings in libraries are searchable here: <https://search.worldcat.org/title/495585238>. It is also included in a DVD recording with other children’s stories about gardens, entitled, “The Curious Garden and Other Stories About Nature,” which is available at libraries, organized by zip code here: <https://search.worldcat.org/title/812197118>.

Sermon Notes

Being Trust-Worthy Stewards

As someone who loves to travel, photograph landscapes, events, and people, I am keenly aware that whenever I am in a new community or location, I must be sensitive to any laws, regulations, or authorities that could restrict my ability to take pictures or videos. And on some occasions I have been asked, “What authority do you have to record or photograph? Who gave you permission?” And as a person of color with (often) a larger camera and lens in tow, my equipment only adds to my being identified as an outsider. Obviously, such encounters are triggered by questions of trust.

In the Gospel of Mark 11:28, we find a similar tone of questioning that Jesus faced from church authorities. “By what authority are you doing these things?” they asked. “And who gave you authority to do this?” Through these questions it is clear, there is a deep sense of discomfort (and the lack of trust) caused by the presence and actions of Jesus and his disciples. Although

today's lesson is focused on the dynamics around Jesus' cursing the fig tree, I believe that the events leading to and right after help us understand the full picture being connected by these passages. The main movements we observe are:

- a. Jesus enters the city, turns tables in the Temple, then heals people.
- b. Jesus curses the fig tree. Fig tree withers and dies.
- c. Jesus' (teaching) authority is questioned by the chief priests and elders.

By breaking down these elements of Matthew 21:1-27, here's what we find:

Matthew 1-17. The beginning part of the passage starts with Jesus preparing to go into Jerusalem. He then enters the city on a donkey with a multitude proclaiming, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" and with people in the city asking, "Who is this man being praised?" Then Jesus angrily enters the Temple in Jerusalem, turning the tables of traders and sellers, before healing people.

Matthew 18-21. Jesus searches for fruit from a fig tree but finds nothing except leaves. He then curses the tree, causing it to wither immediately. And when asked by the disciples about what they have just witnessed, he reminds them "If you have faith and do not doubt, you will receive whatever you ask in prayer."

Matthew 21:23-27. The chief priests and elders in the Temple challenge the authority of Jesus. "By what authority are you doing these things? And who gave you authority to do this?" they ask.

These Matthew passages revolve around the Temple with the chief priests and scribes questioning Jesus, while the middle section of the story is about Jesus cursing a fig tree, causing it to die.

But what is the connection between the events in the Temple and the fig tree? In order to get a more holistic picture, we need to look at the parallel account from Mark 11:11-25.

Mark's Gospel makes this connection more explicit by splitting the passages a bit differently. In Mark we see Jesus' cursing and withering the fig tree as two separate events, placing the cleansing of the Temple in between them. Mark's version suggests a stronger connection of the fig tree to the events that evolve before and after Jesus curses the tree. But let's just be clear why Jesus turns the tables...

Mark 11:15-17 (NIV84) "On reaching Jerusalem, Jesus entered the Temple area and began driving out those who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves and would not allow anyone to carry

merchandise through the Temple courts. And as he taught them, he said, 'Is it not written: "My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations"? But you have made it a den of robbers.'"

Clearly, Jesus was angry because the Temple was supposed to be a house of prayer for all nations but has now become a place for dirty business and trade that benefits a few.

Jesus' cursing of the fig tree for not being able to bear fruit is clearly a simile as to how Jesus experienced his time in the Temple. God's Temple intended for prayer and worship has lost its purpose and identity. It has become a den for cheaters. All under the watchful eyes of the chief priests and elders. Such acts of rebellion against God's intentions and purpose tell us of how we as humans can easily fall against what God has entrusted to us. These types of actions highlight our susceptibility to greed and desires towards personal gain and profit without regard or respect for one another and for God's creation.

Being born and raised in the Philippines, I have personally seen, witnessed (and photographed) the many ways by which foreigners have come to sweet talk, deceive, and cheat us into selling our land and resources. Indigenous folks who have been led to believe that by selling the land and natural resources, we are doing what is best for our community and our children's children. Yet to this day, the Philippines remains one of the poorest and most exploited countries in the world. Filipinos have been stripped of their natural resources, all in the name of profit and gain.

As a photojournalist and news director in the mid 90's, my crew and I have been questioned and asked to leave mining sites, forest clearing projects and fishing expeditions that use TNT and other explosives because our presence makes the owners very uncomfortable. We received death threats because according to them we do not have the proper authority to record. Yet we continued to roll our cameras. We have recorded what we saw and experienced, and shared these stories so that others may know what is true.

May we be trustworthy stewards of God's creation and intention. May we live as trustworthy stewards. And may we not allow God's creation to wither, decay, and die, all in the name of profit and personal gain. Let us trust our God of justice, creation, and love to continue being with us.

Believing that our faith-full prayers will be answered in Jesus' name. May it be so. Amen.

Pastoral Prayer

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 spins off balance. The heat comes 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. Our trust is in you. Hear our prayers!

(Optional, prayers of the people: We lift our voices to pray, hear us now....)

God, whose name is high over all, 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, nor the ocean storms. For you are our strength and we are your people. Amen.

(Optional, The Lord's Prayer.)

Benediction⁴

The wisdom from above has purity as its essence.

It works for peace; it's kind and considerate.

It's full of compassion and shows itself by doing good.

Nor is there any trace of partiality or hypocrisy in it.

Peacemakers, when they work for peace,

sow the seeds that will bear fruit in holiness.

A version of this [Benediction is available in Google slides format](#) for inclusion in worship slides.

⁴ Adapted from James 3:17-18, Priests for Equality. *The Inclusive Bible* (p. 2528). Sheed & Ward.

Week 5: Flourishing

Possible Date: 9/29/2024

Focus Scripture: Luke 13:6-9 and Zechariah 3:7ish-10

Bringing the Theme to Life in the Worship Space

Depending on whether your congregation will have a Blessing of the Animals this week, the ways you interact with the tree may be different.

If the Blessing of the Animals is not part of your plan for this Sunday, you may wish to invite people to create flowers and add them to the tree using paper cutouts or thumbprints in ink of various colors as a symbol of their lending a hand and creating a beloved and beautiful community together.

If you are having a Blessing of the Animals, you might want to add many types of animals in and around the tree. You could have paper cutouts of different types of animals, you could invite people to bring animals or photos of animals and bring them to the tree, individually or in groups (dogs separate from cats, for example) for blessing. If you are not inviting people to bring pets, but you want to engage with the idea of a blessing of the animals, origami animals may be added to the tree, representing all of Creation flourishing together.

Hymn Suggestions

“Wash, O God, Our Sons and Daughters” (UMH 605)

“Just As I Am” (UMH 357)

“Amazing Grace” (UMH 378)

“Lift Every Voice and Sing” (UMH 519)

“Forth in Thy Name, O Lord” (UMH 438)

“The Lord of Life a Vine Is He” (WS 3155)

Call to Worship

We till the soil.

God brings the flourishing.

We sow the seeds.

God brings the flourishing.

We water the ground.

God brings the flourishing.

We savor the fruit.

God is our flourishing.

A version of this [Call to Worship is available in Google slides format](#) for inclusion in worship slides.

Engaging Children in Worship

How to Prepare

- Make flower-shaped papers and attach a string or tape so they can be fastened to the tree. Bring crayons or markers to write on the flowers.
- Bring the plant you planted in Week One. Explore with your church trustees or other leadership whether there is a place on the church grounds where you can plant it after the worship series. If not, explore other options for the plant so it will be able to continue to grow and flourish.
- Write the repeat-after-me prayer for this week on a flower-shaped paper:

Holy God,
Thank you for providing for our needs
so that we can flourish and help others too.
Amen.

Time With Children

Part 1: Planting

- Ask: How is the seed you planted doing? Is it beginning to flourish? What is helping it to grow? Now that you are almost done with the series, what will you do with the plant? Will you plant it in your church yard?
- Take time with the children to make plans for the future flourishing of the plant you have grown.

Part 2: Notice and Compare

- Explain that today's theme is flourishing, which means something similar to thriving or living your best life. Ask children to share signs of flourishing in their own life and the community around them. (They may notice that when they are flourishing, they feel like dancing or singing or shouting or writing or having a party. Children might recognize a hug from a loved one or a promise kept as a sign of a family flourishing. If a school is flourishing, it might have artwork from many children on the walls, smiling teachers in the hallways, or awards in an

award case. If a church is flourishing, it might have new ideas for ministry that children can participate in.)

- Help children recognize that flourishing applies to plants too. During this time of year, children may have heard of harvest parties or harvest festivals where produce is brought in from fields and saved for the year. Some farmers don't take all the produce their fields produce, leaving some for other animals and the soil so they also have what they need. Harvest provides food for birds, humans, other animals, as well as the entire ecosystem, helping us all flourish. When we flourish and are healthy, we can help others.
- Remind children that we talked about the fig in Week One. The fig tree grows large and the leaves provide shelter and shade. In biblical times, communities gathered under the fig tree for shelter and fellowship and so not only did the tree provide food for their bodies to flourish, but it also provided space for the community to flourish through renewed relationships built during periods of rest in the shade of the tree. Inquire if children know of trees in your community that provide shade for people to gather for protection from heat? In much of the US, oak trees once were this kind of tree, although many oak trees have been cut to produce timber or to make space for human development. If there are oak trees near your church, consider bringing a picture of one. Ask if children know how oak trees can help communities flourish (provide shade from sun, acorns for food for squirrels and others, and leaves that fall and can be used for mulch in gardens and planting beds, etc.)

Part 3: Interact With the Tree

- Invite the children to identify aloud and write words on a flower-shaped paper to show how God is growing them to help at home, school, church, or community in relationship to personal experience. Then give them a chance to attach it to the tree in the worship space.
- Say a prayer that is written on a flower-shaped paper and then attach it to the tree in the worship space. Repeat-after-me prayer:

Holy God,
Thank you for providing for our needs
so that we can flourish and help others too.
Amen.

Ideas for Extending to Sunday School or at Home

- Read *City Green*, by DyAnne Di Salvo-Ryan. Search for your zip code at <https://search.worldcat.org/title/28888338> to find it in a library near you.
- Visit the new site where the plant you have grown will be planted. Possibly, have children help replant it there when it's time. If it will be going to someone else's home, consider having that person visit with children and answer their questions about how the plant can flourish in its new home.

- If your congregation has a coffee hour after worship, explore whether the children might be able to prepare some of the snacks for coffee hour to help the community flourish this week. Perhaps they could mix fruits together to make a fruit salad, bake cookie or biscuit dough so there are hot, fresh goodies for the adults as they come out of worship, or mix up some punch on this occasion. Perhaps include figs or fig newtons in the festivities.

Sermon Notes

“‘Sir,’ the man replied, ‘leave it alone for one more year, and I’ll dig around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.’” (Luke 13:8-9)

The Gospel of Luke is intense with almost no alternatives: “If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.”

Positive psychologist and professor Dr. Lynn Soots describes **flourishing** as the following:

“Flourishing is the product of the pursuit and engagement of an authentic life that brings inner joy and happiness through meeting goals, being connected with life passions, and relishing in accomplishments through the peaks and valleys of life.”

Dr. Soots is careful to note that flourishing is not a trait or a characteristic; it’s not something that you “either have or don’t have.” She states that flourishing is not a static, immutable piece of who you are, it is a process that *requires action*. Anyone can flourish, but it will likely require some effort to get there.

The parable from Luke encourages us to react and respond, to take action and effort to the grace of God with repentance—change our mind and make a commitment to spiritual growth. It calls us to examine our lives and ask ourselves: Are we bearing fruit in accordance with God’s will? Are we living in a way that honors God and blesses others?

John Newton, known for “Amazing Grace,” also wrote a hymn called, “Once, O Lord, Thy Garden Flourished.”

1 Once, O Lord, thy garden flourished,
Every part looked gay and green;
Then thy word our spirits nourished,
Happy seasons we have seen!

2 But a drought has since succeeded,
And a sad decline we see;
Lord, thy help is greatly needed,
Help can only come from thee.

6 Dearest Savior, hasten hither,

Thou canst make them bloom again;
Oh, permit them not to wither,
Let not all our hopes be vain!

The first stanza describes the success of a garden when God is the resource. The first part of Stanza 2 describes that it is time to "...cut it down." But the second part of stanzas 2 and 6 make clear the writer's trust in the grace of God. As a paraphrase, I can say: Lord, you have the power to make them blossom once more.

Flourishing in the vineyard of God means actively seeking to grow in our faith, to deepen our relationship with God, and to bear fruit that glorifies our Lord. It means being rooted in Christ, drawing nourishment from him through prayer, Scripture, worship, and fellowship with other believers.

Let's keep in mind that God wants all of us to flourish in God's vineyard as we ponder this parable. God invites us to live a purposeful and meaningful life, producing fruit that benefits others and honors God's name.

Let us welcome God's grace and be receptive to the transforming work in our hearts. Let's dedicate ourselves to increasing our faith, producing plentiful fruits, and following Jesus Christ faithfully.

I end this thought with a flourishing quote from author Kristin Michelle Elizabeth: "Change is essential to growth. Embrace the unpredictability, accept your own painful process, and know opinion can never take away your personal truth. Allow yourself to flourish into a matured, improved version of yourself, but know that it takes time."

Pastoral Prayer

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. Help us in this time of great need! We have unbalanced your Earth. We have squandered too much. Hear our prayer today, that we may flourish as you intend.

(Optional, prayers of the people: Amazing God, hear us as we pray....)

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. Let the fruit flourish, common and well rooted, native plants growing in their own native earth! We will hold high and bless our

gathering baskets, filled with your harvest, at every season! Let the long beans, round gourds, sun-warm berries and sugar-sticky figs be stringy and savory, juicy and sweet. For you, O God! You are our One Divine and we are your people. We will praise you and bless your name for today, and for generations to come. Amen.

(Optional, The Lord's Prayer.)

Benediction

Like nutrients drawn by the sun

through the tree to its fruit,

may we be rooted in God's grace

and freely bear fruit

for the blessing of all creation.

The fruit was not made for us,

but through us,

may God bring flourishing.

A version of this [Benediction is available in Google slides format](#) for inclusion in worship slides.

Contributors

Thematic Arc	Rev. Richenda Fairhurst
Planning Worship Space	Rev. Laura Baumgartner
Preaching Notes/Sermon starters:	
Week 1: John 1: 44-50 and Haggai 2:18-19	Rev. Laura Baumgartner
Week 2: Luke 21:29-33 and Jeremiah 24:1-10	Rev. Fernando Sanchez
Week 3: Mark 11:12-14 and Micah 4:4	Rev. Richenda Fairhurst
Week 4: Matthew 21:18-22; 24:32-35 and Joel 2:21-24	Rev. David Valera
Week 5: Luke 13:6-9 and Zechariah 3:7ish-10	Rev. Fernando Sanchez
Opening Prayers/Call to Worship/Benediction	Rev. Paul Mitchell
Communion Liturgy/ies: berries and/or fig newtons	Rev. Danielle Estelle Ramsay Rev. Paul Mitchell (prayer after receiving)
Children's Resources	Ann Mayer Carolyn Nichols
Pastoral Prayers	Rev. Richenda Fairhurst
Music Suggestions/Music Notes	Rev. Laurie Bayen
Leadership/Organization/Editing	Rev. Laura Baumgartner
Editor	Crys Zinkiewicz
Chant	Rev. Laurie Bayen
Video Threshold Moment	Rev. Laurie Bayen
Slides for Calls to Worship and Benediction	Rev. Laurie Bayen
Devotional Guide	Rev. Richenda Fairhurst

Biographical Information

	Rev. Laura Baumgartner is an ordained elder in the Pacific Northwest Conference of The United Methodist Church. She serves of the Haller Lake United Methodist Church in Seattle, Washington. She also chairs the board of Earth Ministry/WA Interfaith Power and Light. She taught high school chemistry for many years before becoming a second career pastor and loves to learn about the world we share.
	Rev. Laurie Bayen is currently serving as pastor at Windsor Community United Methodist Church in Sonoma County, California. She has a passion for music, prayer, and the use of projected imagery in worship, as well as connecting with the Divine in nature. She sings with a 4-part women's acapella jazz ensemble called Vinyl Revival, and spends much of her free time hiking and sailing with her spouse, Albert, around the San Francisco Bay. She is also an EarthKeeper and creator of Sacred Ground, a spirituality and climate justice-focused audio tour of scenic vistas, parks and trails in Northern California, available on the free Otocast smartphone app.
	Rev. Richenda Fairhurst is a UM EarthKeeper and a member of the United Methodist Creation Justice Movement, including serving on the coordinating team and co-convening the Movement Cafe. In her home state of Oregon, she serves on the board of Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon, where she chairs the Creation Justice Committee, which is also Oregon Interfaith Power and Light. Find her on substack at justcreation.org



Ann Mayer, M.Div., is a United Methodist EarthKeeper, and is active in the Pacific Northwest Annual Conference. She is an Eco-feminist Theologian with a passion for Social Justice, Creation Care, and helping people to connect their faith with care for the earth. Ann is currently serving as lay leader at her local church, Federal Way UMC, which recently was awarded a \$872,000 grant toward a solar and storage installation.



Rev. Paul Mitchell is a second-career and second-generation pastor serving Pioneer United Methodist in Walla Walla, Washington. His first career was in architecture in the early days of Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) training and certification. His transition into ministry came in response to the convulsive cultural responses following September 11, 2001. Rev. Mitchell has focused on the Season of Creation in September for over a decade and is currently seeking to expand intersectional attention to environmental justice throughout the year in worship, study, and service.



Carolyn Nichols lives in Rocky Mount, NC and is a layperson serving at Englewood United Methodist Church in Rocky Mount, NC in the North Carolina Conference and a member at Epworth Chapel UMC in the Baltimore-Washington Conference. She is active in the United Methodist Creation Justice Movement.

 A portrait of Rev. Fernando P. Sanchez, a middle-aged man with grey hair, glasses, and a mustache. He is wearing a dark suit jacket, a white shirt, and a red and black striped tie.	Rev. Fernando P. Sanchez has been an associated member of the Rio Texas Annual Conference of The United Methodist Church for the last 33 years. Rev. Sanchez is serving a cross-racial and cross-cultural appointment at West Texas.
 A portrait of Rev. Danielle Estelle Ramsay, a woman with shoulder-length brown hair. She is wearing a dark blue top with a green and yellow patterned shawl draped over her shoulders.	Rev. Danielle Estelle Ramsay is a pastor, writer, and artist based in the Pacific Northwest. They currently serve Simpson United Methodist Church and the Wesley Foundation at Washington State University in Pullman, Washington. They are an Elder in Full Connection in the PNWAC. Highly committed to communities rooted in collective liberation and justice, they are passionate about seeing a world where all can flourish. They live in Pullman with their daughter, Stella, and spouse, Barry.
 A portrait of Rev. David Valera, a man with dark hair and glasses. He is wearing a dark blue button-down shirt with white embroidery on the collar.	Rev. David Valera serves as Executive Director of Connectional Ministries in the Pacific Northwest Conference of the United Methodist Church. David is a UM Earthkeeper. He loves music, deep conversations, and experiential learning. He likes things organized but is deeply intrigued by the mystery of chaos.



Crys Zinkiewicz has been active at the national, conference, and local church levels through her work as an editor at the United Methodist Publishing House and her participation on green teams. She has developed and led multiple workshops through Lay Servant Ministries and BeaDisciple.org. She also writes the monthly “Creation Justice Tips” published by the United Methodist Creation Justice Movement and used by churches around the world.

Additional Resources

Fig biology resource:

<https://www.esa.org/esablog/2011/05/20/the-story-of-the-fig-and-its-wasp/#:~:text=That%20is%20C%20a%20fig%20is,navigate%20within%20these%20confined%20quarters>

Storypath website, connecting children’s literature with the faith life:

<https://storypath.upsem.edu/>

Information about native berries in North America:

<https://vividmaps.com/berries-of-north-america/>