

I am thrilled to be preaching outside this morning. It's always been a dream of mine to start a church that meets outside where we don't worry about building expenses, and we forage for food. We would be called #churchofthewild and it will be all kinds of glorious! I know this raises logistical questions and concerns, not to mention may sound like more of a cult, so I assure you there's no actual plans to start #churchofthewild... yet. Now some people do not label themselves "outdoors" people and that's totally OK. There are a variety of ways we all experience God. Today I am focusing on experiencing God through sabbath in nature. If you aren't much of an outdoor person, I encourage you to step outside of your comfort zone. One way for people to learn about their Creator is to go beyond the church walls and engage with the natural world God created for us.

God gave us nature as a gift to enjoy, and as a way to provide for our physical needs, and an opportunity to connect with the Almighty by engaging in creation care. Studies also prove that twenty minutes of contact with nature each day reduces our stress level. It's as if God has given us a natural healing balm for our anxiety. Finding God in nature is a way we discover our purpose and divine connection with our Creator. Stepping outside our physical comfort of indoors and into nature awakens us to how much we rely on material possessions to fulfill our needs. Getting into nature liberates us from being owned by our possessions.

Spending time in nature helps us realize a truth found in James 1:17 that every good and perfect gift is from above, and we are truly dependent on God for everything. Every time the sun rises, and every time we fill our lungs with air, whenever it rains or the earth rotates... life continues on because God wills it so. These are significant truths that are at the foundation of our understanding of who our Creator is. Spending time in nature is essential to our humanity and our understanding of our connection with the Divine.

Throughout Scripture, people would focus on and soak up the natural beauty around them as a way to praise and glorify the Lord.

- Genesis 1:10 Declares nature good
- Job 37:14-24; 38
- Psalm 96:11-12 Let the heavens rejoice the earth is glad, the sea and the fields are jubilant and the trees are singing
- Psalm 95:4-5 Mountains and seas created by God and belong to God
- Isaiah 43:20 the wild animals honor me
- Moses holy moments mountain and with a bush
- Song of Solomon - nature metaphors for relationship
- Romans 1:20 Paul says we are without excuse
- Jesus climbed a mountain many times
- Jesus prayed in the garden
- Jesus cursed fig tree
- Jesus walked in vineyards

- Jesus walked on water
- Preaches from a boat
- Jesus calming the storm

If Jesus had a church name I am pretty sure it would be called Church of the Wild. He taught people in outdoor spaces and used nature to teach lessons about God. My favorite example of this is in Matthew 6. Please open your Bibles or find the passage on your app. I want you to look at this passage within its proper context. Check out the first word “Therefore”. Whenever you see the word therefore you have to rewind. It’s a clue that you have to understand the greater context of the whole chapter to have a better understanding of the passage. Scan your eyes to the beginning of the chapter where Jesus gives instructions about giving to the needy and praying humbly. This is followed by a lesson on fasting and not storing up treasures on earth. All of these lessons combined provide an overarching theme of scarcity vs generosity. When we view the world through a lens of scarcity and fear we tend to hoard, be greedy, worry excessively. When we view the world trusting God to provide for our needs we are generous and experience peace and joy.

This is the context that the “therefore” is leaning from. Now that you know this, while I read this visualize Jesus saying these words while looking into the trees or the skies...

Matthew 6:25-30...

*25 “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? 26 Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? 27 Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life[e]?”*

*28 “And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. 29 Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. 30 If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? 31 So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ 32 For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. 33 But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. 34 Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own*

Worrying about the next meal or getting basic needs met was the reality of life for those in the first century Jesus was speaking to. It was a challenge to acquire the necessities of life-like food and clothing-through laborious living. There are people today who are experiencing this. For others we may not be worried where our next meal is coming from but we often worry about finances, how to pay off debt, worried about losing your job or getting a job, or if our sick or elderly parent will make it another day, or getting an assignment done, facing discrimination, or worried about getting sick. There are plenty of worries that choke the life out of us no matter who you are.

When Jesus encouraged his followers in the first century world not to “worry” it comes from greek word “merimneso”, it means “to be overly concerned; to care too much; to be anxious”. The emphasis of the text is upon excessive worrying or anxiety about our needs in life. It’s natural and normal to worry. However, it’s the excessive worry, the kind that keeps us up at night, the kind consuming our thoughts robbing us of experiencing joy and purpose in our lives... this is the kind of worry Jesus wants us to be free from.

Wallet Story. Summary: God take care of basic needs

My therapist tells me, when we focus on the future we feel anxious (merimneso). When we focus on the past we tend to feel depressed. However, when we focus on the present moment we feel the most peace. Jesus knew this wisdom, and it is why in Matthew 6 he urged people to stay focused on the present day and pay attention to nature. Another term for this is called “mindfulness”. My kids go to a super hippie school called Ann Arbor Open, and their school teaches and practices mindfulness every day. Mindfulness is the practice of living in the moment, being present. There are several practices related to mindfulness that can help people live in the moment. One of those is meditation through breathing. My favorite way to practice mindfulness is to be present in nature or in even simpler terms, “pay attention”. In Matthew 6, Jesus reminds us to pay attention to the ways God is at work in nature around us.

When was the last time you slowed down while outdoors, smelled the flowers, felt the warmth of the sun, stared at the clouds or stars, or noticed the wind against your skin? There’s a big difference between simply being outside and actually paying attention to nature. Meditating on nature, studying creation, and noticing the details reveals truths about how God engages with our world. Slowing down, finding a way to experience sabbath through being mindful in nature acts as a remedy to our anxiety as well.

This morning I am going to give you an opportunity to get into nature by drawing an object from nature.

Closing Activity (5 min)

Find an object in nature that you would like to draw. It can be a stick, a leaf, flower, tree, a rock, a piece of bark or a blade of grass. It doesn’t have to be anything super amazing. Spend a minute simply observing this object. Then draw this object attempting to capture all the intricate details. This is NOT about being an amazing artist. It’s about slowing down and paying attention to the details in nature made by our Creator. Nobody has to see your drawing so don’t be a perfectionist. Spend about five minutes drawing this the best you can.

After you finish drawing, reflect on the following questions...

- What does this object in nature say about who God is?
- What is something you think God might be trying to reveal to you during your time in nature today or through your object you drew?

If God puts this much effort into creating, designing, and caring for nature... how much more do you think God cares for you and will take care of what you need.