

The Trail System at St. John

Exploring a Theology of Wilderness

Background

- A wilderness church
- A church as a refuge
- Holy Hikes Ministry
- A generous man with a big vision







The Rt. Rev. Levi Silliman Ives



Sunday School Class at St. John, 1958





*Green River Cove Trail
Green River Game Lands
January 2021*



*Cedar Rock Falls
Pisgah National Forest
September 2022*



*Holy Hike Retreat
Valle Crucis Conference Center
October 2023*

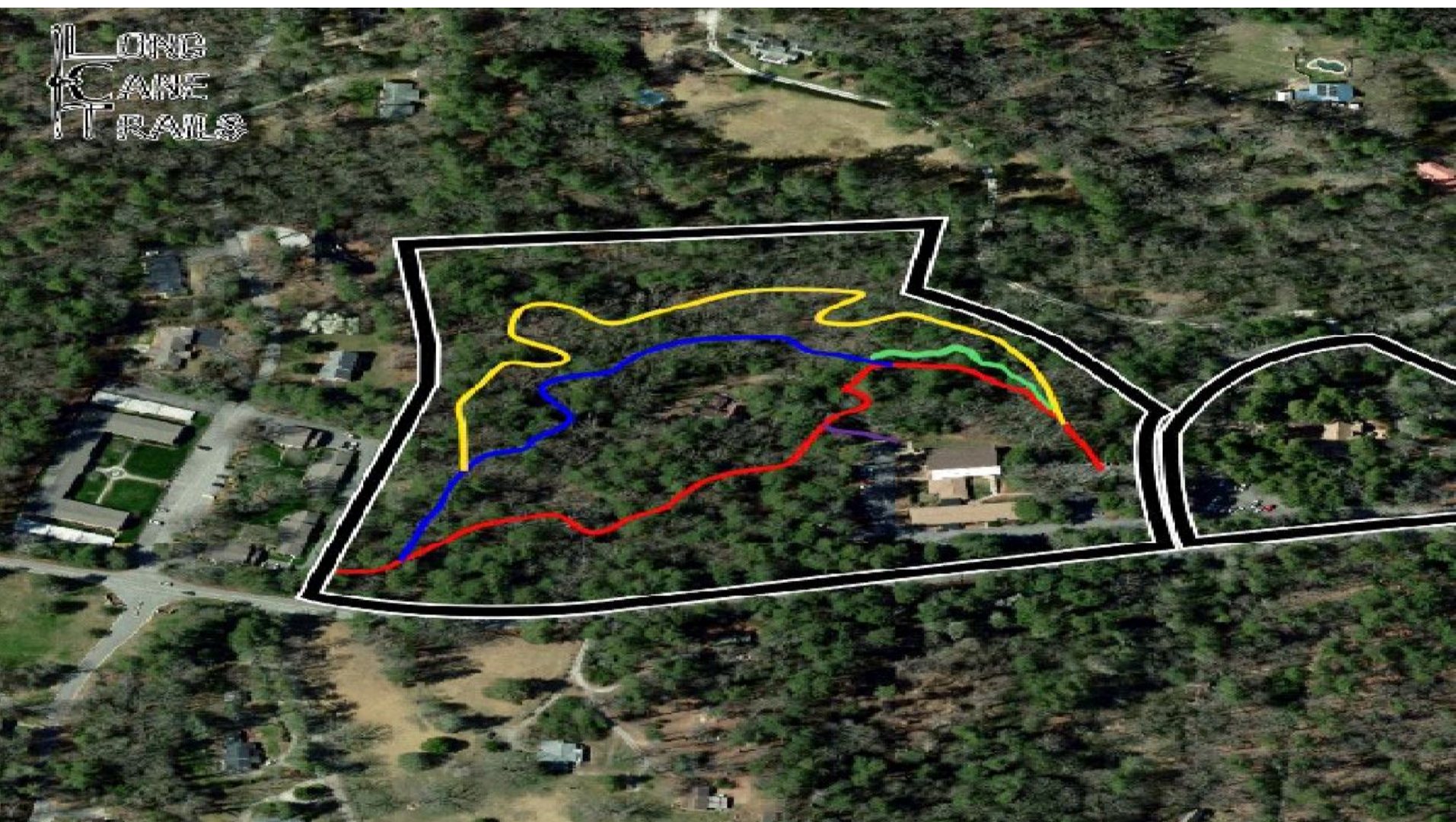


*Stone Mountain
DuPont State Forest
June 2024*



Rivers & Susan (Nilsson) Stone

LONG
CAVE
TRAILS



The beginning of the good news* of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.*

2 As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,*

'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,*
who will prepare your way;

3 the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
"Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight" ';

4 John the baptizer appeared* in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 5 And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

6 Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. 7 He proclaimed, 'The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. 8 I have baptized you with* water; but he will baptize you with* the Holy Spirit.'

9 In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. 10 And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. 11 And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved;* with you I am well pleased.'

12 And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. 13 He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

14 Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news* of God,* 15 and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near;* repent, and believe in the good news.'

16 As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake—for they were fishermen. 17 And Jesus said to them, 'Follow me and I will make you fish for people.' 18 And immediately they left their nets and followed him. 19 As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. 20 Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

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Conversation

Questions

Time for Thinking

The Wilderness of the Gospels

Recap: When we read Scripture, we often gloss right over the locations where God shows up or where lives are transformed. If we look more closely, we realize that wild and beautiful places are consistently the context for growth and grace. What if we are called to go to the locations to encounter our Wilderness God and God's handiwork so we might be changed?

Let's begin with the Gospels.

Christ in the Wilderness

[Moretto da Brescia](#)

[\(Alessandro Bonvicino\)](#)

Italian, ca. 1515–20

Moretto imagines Christ steeped in introspective calm, remarkably unfazed as animals mill around him, angels fuss overhead, and a small dragon or basilisk creeps at his feet.



Matthew 14 & Gospel of Wilderness

14 At that time Herod the ruler^[a] heard reports about Jesus; **2** and he said to his servants, 'This is John the Baptist; he has been raised from the dead, and for this reason these powers are at work in him.' **3** For Herod had arrested John, bound him, and put him in prison on account of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife,^[b] **4** because John had been telling him, 'It is not lawful for you to have her.' **5** Though Herod^[c] wanted to put him to death, he feared the crowd, because they regarded him as a prophet. **6** But when Herod's birthday came, the daughter of Herodias danced before the company, and she pleased Herod **7** so much that he promised on oath to grant her whatever she might ask. **8** Prompted by her mother, she said, 'Give me the head of John the Baptist here on a platter.' **9** The king was grieved, yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he commanded it to be given; **10** he sent and had John beheaded in the prison. **11** The head was brought on a platter and given to the girl, who brought it to her mother. **12** His disciples came and took the body and buried it; then they went and told Jesus. **13** Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself.

Matthew 14 & Gospel Wilderness

But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. **14** When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. **15** When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, 'This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves.' **16** Jesus said to them, 'They need not go away; you give them something to eat.' **17** They replied, 'We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish.' **18** And he said, 'Bring them here to me.' **19** Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. **20** And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. **21** And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

22 Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. **23** And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone,

Matthew 14 & Gospel Wilderness

24 but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land,^[d] for the wind was against them. **25** And early in the morning he came walking towards them on the lake. **26** But when the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified, saying, 'It is a ghost!' And they cried out in fear. **27** But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, 'Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.'

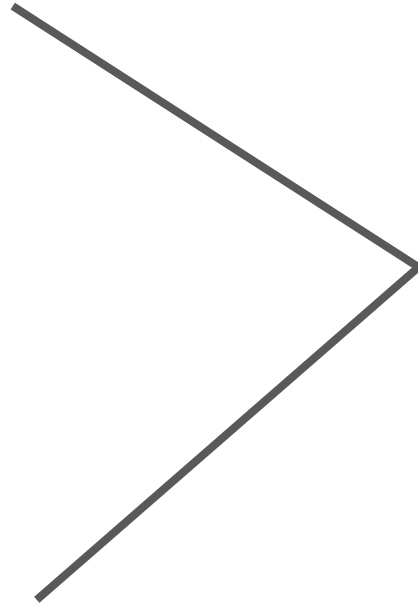
28 Peter answered him, 'Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.' **29** He said, 'Come.' So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came towards Jesus. **30** But when he noticed the strong wind,^[e] he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, 'Lord, save me!' **31** Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, 'You of little faith, why did you doubt?' **32** When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. **33** And those in the boat worshipped him, saying, 'Truly you are the Son of God.'

The Wilderness of the Gospels

Rest & Renewal

Revelation

Transformation



God's work of
making us whole
again in Christ.

Salvation, Sanctification,
Healing, Hope, Redemption,
Illumination.

Gospel Wilderness as Rest / Renewal

10 Jesus said, 'Make the people sit down.' Now there was a great deal of grass in the place; so they sat down, about five thousand in all. **11** Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted. **12** When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, 'Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost.' **13** So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets. **14** When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, 'This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world.'

15 When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself. (John 6:10-15)

Gospel Wilderness as Rest / Renewal

Luke 5 begins with the calling the disciples to leave their nets and follow him.

12 Once, when he was in one of the cities, there was a man covered with leprosy. When he saw Jesus, he bowed with his face to the ground and begged him, 'Lord, if you choose, you can make me clean.' **13** Then Jesus stretched out his hand, touched him, and said, 'I do choose. Be made clean.' Immediately the leprosy left him. **14** And he ordered him to tell no one. 'Go', he said, 'and show yourself to the priest, and, as Moses commanded, make an offering for your cleansing, for a testimony to them.' **15** But now more than ever the word about Jesus spread abroad; many crowds would gather to hear him and to be cured of their diseases. **16** But he would withdraw to deserted places and pray.

This chapter continues with Jesus healing the man who is lowered through the roof, as well as a confrontation with the Pharisees.

Gospel Wilderness as Rest / Renewal

6 On another sabbath he entered the synagogue and taught, and there was a man there whose right hand was withered. **7** The scribes and the Pharisees watched him to see whether he would cure on the sabbath, so that they might find an accusation against him.... **10** After looking around at all of them, he said to him, 'Stretch out your hand.' He did so, and his hand was restored. **11** But they were filled with fury and discussed with one another what they might do to Jesus.

12 Now during those days he went out to the mountain to pray; and he spent the night in prayer to God.

13 And when day came, he called his disciples and chose twelve of them, whom he also named apostles: **14** Simon, whom he named Peter, and his brother Andrew, and James, and John, and Philip, and Bartholomew, **15** and Matthew, and Thomas, and James son of Alphaeus, and Simon, who was called the Zealot, **16** and Judas son of James, and Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor. (Luke 6:6-16)

Gospel Wilderness as Revelation

Matthew 5:1

“When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them saying....

Gospel Wilderness as Revelation

2 Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, **3** and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. **4** And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. **5** Then Peter said to Jesus, 'Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.' **6** He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. **7** Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, 'This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!' **8** Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus. (Mark 9:2-8)

Gospel Wilderness as Transformation

Mark 4:35-41

35 And the same day, when the even was come, he saith unto them, Let us pass over unto the other side. **36** And when they had sent away the multitude, they took him even as he was in the ship. And there were also with him other little ships. **37** And there arose a great storm of wind, and the waves beat into the ship, so that it was now full. **38** And he was in the hinder part of the ship, asleep on a pillow: and they awake him, and say unto him, Master, carest thou not that we perish? **39** And he arose, and rebuked the wind, and said unto the sea, "Peace, be still." And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm. **40** And he said unto them, "Why are ye so fearful? how is it that ye have no faith?" **41** And they feared exceedingly, and said one to another, "What manner of man is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?"

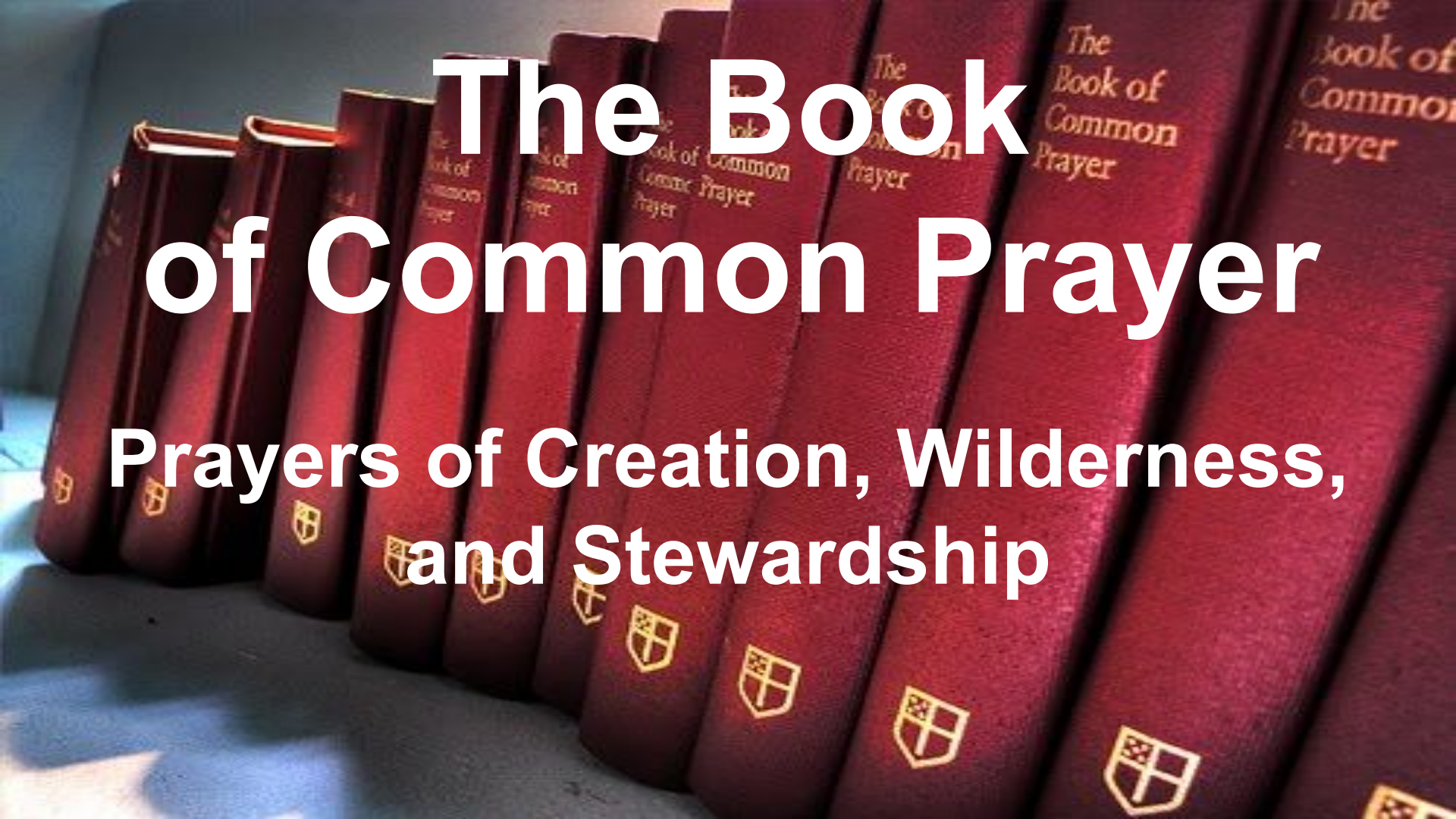
Gospel Wilderness as Transformation

Mark 1:12-13

12 And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. **13** He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

Gospel Wilderness as Transformation

39 He came out and went, as was his custom, to the Mount of Olives; and the disciples followed him. **40** When he reached the place, he said to them, 'Pray that you may not come into the time of trial.' **41** Then he withdrew from them about a stone's throw, knelt down, and prayed, **42** 'Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done.' **43** Then an angel from heaven appeared to him and gave him strength. **44** In his anguish he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground. **45** When he got up from prayer, he came to the disciples and found them sleeping because of grief, **46** and he said to them, 'Why are you sleeping? Get up and pray that you may not come into the time of trial.'

A row of red leather-bound books titled "The Book of Common Prayer" is shown. The spines of the books are visible, featuring gold crests and the title in gold lettering. The books are arranged in a slightly overlapping manner, creating a sense of depth. The lighting is warm, highlighting the texture of the leather and the gold details.

The Book of Common Prayer

Prayers of Creation, Wilderness,
and Stewardship

Lex Orandi, Lex Credendi

What does this mean?

The law of prayer is the law of belief.

“Prayer shapes believing.”

The BCP and Creation: A Few Assumptions

About God: We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen.

About Jesus Christ:

Through him all things were made. For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven: by the power of the Holy Spirit he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary, and was made man.

The BCP and Creation: Holy Eucharist

Rite I Liturgy does not have much creation or wilderness language.

“And we most humbly beseech thee, O merciful Father, to hear us; and, of thy almighty goodness, vouchsafe to bless and sanctify, with thy Word and Holy Spirit, these thy gifts and creatures of bread and wine...” (pg 335)

The BCP and Creation: Holy Eucharist, Rite II

Prayer A: “Holy and gracious Father: In your infinite love you made us for yourself....”

Prayer B: “We give thanks to you, O God, for the goodness and love which you have made known to us in creation....”

“And we offer our sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving to you, O Lord of all; presenting to you, from your creation, this bread and this wine....”

The BCP & Creation: Holy Eucharist, Prayer C

“God of all power, Ruler of the Universe, you are worthy of glory and praise.
Glory to you for ever and ever.

At your command all things came to be: the vast expanse of interstellar space, galaxies, suns, the planets in their courses, and this fragile earth, our island home.

By your will they were created and have their being.

From the primal elements you brought forth the human race, and blessed us with memory, reason, and skill. You made us the rulers of creation. But we turned against you, and betrayed your trust; and we turned against one another.
Have mercy, Lord, for we are sinners in your sight.

The BCP & Creation: Holy Eucharist, Prayer D

It is truly right to glorify you, Father, and to give you thanks; for you alone are God, living and true, dwelling in light inaccessible from before time and for ever.

Fountain of life and source of all goodness, you made all things and fill them with your blessing; you created them to rejoice in the splendor of your radiance.

Countless throngs of angels stand before you to serve you night and day; and, beholding the glory of your presence, they offer you unceasing praise. Joining with them, and giving voice to every creature under heaven, we acclaim you, and glorify your Name, as we sing....

The BCP & Creation: Holy Eucharist, Prayer D

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

Hosanna in the highest.

The BCP & Creation: Holy Eucharist, Prayer D

We acclaim you, holy Lord, glorious in power.
Your mighty works reveal your wisdom and
love. You formed us in your own image, giving
the whole world into our care, so that, in
obedience to you, our Creator, we might rule
and serve all your creatures.

The BCP & Creation: Prayers and Collects

Prayers of the People

For the good earth Which God has given us, and for the wisdom and will to conserve it, let us pray to the Lord....

Give us all a reverence for the earth as your own creation, that we may use its resources rightly in the service of others and to your honor and glory....

The BCP & Creation: Prayers and Collects

Collects and other Prayers

Accept, O Lord, our thanks and praise for all that you have done for us. We thank you for the splendor of the whole creation, for the beauty of this world, for the wonder of life, and for the mystery of love.

(BCP, pg 836)

The BCP & Creation: Prayers and Collects

Collect for the Beauty of the Earth

We give you thanks, most gracious God, for the beauty of earth and sky and sea; for the richness of mountains, plains, and rivers; for the songs of birds and the loveliness of flowers. We praise you for these good gifts, and pray that we may safeguard them for our posterity. Grant that we may continue to grow in our grateful enjoyment of your abundant creation, to the honor and glory of your Name, now and for ever. *Amen.*

(BCP, pg 840)

The BCP & Creation: Prayers and Collects

Collect for Knowledge of God's Creation

Almighty and everlasting God, you made the universe with all its marvelous order, its atoms, worlds, and galaxies, and the infinite complexity of living creatures: Grant that, as we probe the mysteries of your creation, we may come to know you more truly, and more surely fulfill our role in your eternal purpose; in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.* (BCP, pg 827)

The BCP & Creation: Prayers and Collects

Collect for Stewardship of Creation

O merciful Creator, your hand is open wide to satisfy the needs of every living creature: Make us always thankful for your loving providence; and grant that we, remembering the account that we must one day give, may be faithful stewards of your good gifts; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

(BCP, pg 259)

Which prayers speak to you?

Which prayers might help you encounter God
and creation well if you encountered them on
a trail?

Other Sources

What might help trails users pray
as they travel the holy ground of
God's creation at St. John?

A Collect for Holy Hikes

Almighty God, the beauty of the world you made surrounds us with your glory and goodness: Fill us with your Spirit as we *hike* with you in these mountains. As your Son Jesus Christ retreated to places of solitude and serenity for rest and renewal, guide us along right pathways for his name's sake. And transform us through the grace of trees and streams and trails to be at one with you and all creation; through the one through whom all things were made, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen.**

Wilderness: A Place of Encounter

Compiled by Reid Tessler

Maybe like David we can't seem to escape our problems. Like Abraham, we are not sure where to go or what to do. Maybe like Moses, we feel overwhelmed with our responsibilities. Or like Elijah, we are simply burnt out.

We all face things in our lives that feel like the wilderness. It is so important to remember the wilderness is a place of preparation, not permanence. God doesn't intend to leave us in the desert places of our lives. He uses them to develop us and prepare us for the places He is leading us to. This is a pattern seen over and over in the Bible.

Prayer by St. Basil of Caesarea

(Bishop who lived 301-379 AD)

O God, enlarge within us the sense of fellowship with all living things, our brothers the animals to whom thou gavest the earth as their home in common with us.

We remember with shame that in the past we have exercised the high dominion of humankind with ruthless cruelty so that the voice of the earth, which should have gone up to thee in song, has been a groan of travail.

May we realize that they live not for us alone but for themselves and for thee, and that they love the sweetness of life. Amen.

John Muir: The Saint of the Sierras

“When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe. One fancies a heart like our own must be beating in every crystal and cell, and we feel like stopping to speak to the plants and animals as friendly fellow mountaineers. Even the rocks seem talkative, sympathetic, brotherly. No wonder when we consider that we all have the same Father and Mother, and are all subject to the same law of love.

A few minutes ago every tree was excited, bowing to the roaring storm, waving, swirling, tossing their branches in glorious enthusiasm like worship. But though to the outer ear these trees are now silent, their songs never cease. Every hidden cell is throbbing with music and life, every fiber thrilling like harp strings, while incense is ever flowing from the balsam bells and leaves. No wonder the hills and groves were God’s first temples, and the more they are cut down and hewn into cathedrals and churches, the farther off and dimmer seems the Lord himself. So we will say our prayers here and sleep with our Mother Earth, and the God of the mountains will never fail us.”

The Peace of Wild Things

By Wendell Berry

When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

Pied Beauty

by Gerard Manley Hopkins

Glory be to God for dappled things –

For skies of couple-colour as a brindled cow;

For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim;

Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls; finches' wings;

Landscape plotted and pieced – fold, fallow, and plough;

And áll trádes, their gear and tackle and trim.

All things counter, original, spare, strange;

Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)

With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim;

He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change:

Praise him.

God's Grandeur

by Gerard Manley Hopkins

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.

It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;

It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil

Crushed. Why do men then now not reckon his rod?

Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;

And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;

And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil

Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

And for all this, nature is never spent;

There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;

And though the last lights off the black West went

Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs —

Because the Holy Ghost over the bent

World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.

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HOW I GO TO THE WOODS

By Mary Oliver

Ordinarily I go to the woods alone, with not a single friend, for they are all smilers and talkers and therefore unsuitable.

I don't really want to be witnessed talking to the catbirds or hugging the old black oak tree. I have my way of praying, as you no doubt have yours.

Besides, when I am alone I can become invisible. I can sit on the top of a dune as motionless as an uprise of weeds, until the foxes run by unconcerned. I can hear the almost unhearable sound of the roses singing.

If you have ever gone to the woods with me, I must love you very much.

Invitation

By Mary Oliver

Oh do you have time
to linger
for just a little while
out of your busy

and very important day
for the goldfinches
that have gathered
in a field of thistles

for a musical battle,
to see who can sing
the highest note,
or the lowest,

or the most expressive of mirth,
or the most tender?
Their strong, blunt beaks
drink the air

Invitation

By Mary Oliver

as they strive
melodiously
not for your sake
and not for mine

and not for the sake of winning
but for sheer delight and gratitude—
believe us, they say,
it is a serious thing

just to be alive
on this fresh morning
in the broken world.

I beg of you,
do not walk by
without pausing
to attend to this
rather ridiculous performance.

Invitation

By Mary Oliver

It could mean something.

It could mean everything.

It could be what Rilke meant, when he wrote:

You must change your life.

Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front

By Wendell Berry

Love the quick profit, the annual raise, vacation with pay. Want more of everything ready-made. Be afraid to know your neighbors and to die. And you will have a window in your head. Not even your future will be a mystery any more. Your mind will be punched in a card and shut away in a little drawer. When they want you to buy something they will call you. When they want you to die for profit they will let you know. So, friends, every day do something that won't compute. Love the Lord. Love the world. Work for nothing. Take all that you have and be poor. Love someone who does not deserve it.

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By Wendell Berry

Denounce the government and embrace the flag. Hope to live in that free republic for which it stands. Give your approval to all you cannot understand. Praise ignorance, for what man has not encountered he has not destroyed. Ask the questions that have no answers. Invest in the millennium. Plant sequoias. Say that your main crop is the forest that you did not plant, that you will not live to harvest. Say that the leaves are harvested when they have rotted into the mold. Call that profit. Prophesy such returns. Put your faith in the two inches of humus that will build under the trees every thousand years. Listen to carrion — put your ear close, and hear the faint chattering of the songs that are to come. Expect the end of the world.

Potential Names for our Trail System

Potential Names for our Trail System in no particular order.
Do you have a favorite or another suggestion?

1. The Little Wilderness of St. John
2. The St. John in the Wilderness Trail System
3. The Trails of St. John
4. The Prayer Preserve of St. John in the Wilderness
5. The SJW Trail System
6. The Trails of SJW