

Diocese of Southern Ohio Vestry Devotionals

Good News to All Creation

Welcome

Welcome to these brief devotionals reflecting upon the place of creation care in the life of the parish and work of the vestry. These monthly devotionals are meant to help vestries begin their meetings with a brief time of reflection and prayer that connects the current liturgical season with life on earth and the work of the vestry. Each devotional will draw from the seasonal lectionary texts and track with the themes of the church year.

These devotionals are meant to be used with little or no preparation. A leader can take the material and lead the devotional time by simply reading the prayers, engagement questions, reflection, and discussion questions. The format for each devotional is the same and is designed to take about 10 – 15 minutes to complete.

- Opening Prayer
- Engagement Questions
- Reflection
- Discussion Questions
- Closing Prayer

The full series covers monthly vestry meetings during the Season of Creation (September/October), Advent, Epiphany, Lent, and Easter. This allows each vestry to engage in a consistent time of prayer and reflection over several months.

- Fall – The Season of Creation (September)
- The Feast of St. Francis – The Gospel to All Creation (October)
- Advent – Visions of Hope for All Creation (November)
- Epiphany - Righteousness Revealed as Justice for All (January)
- Lent – Our Call to Till and Keep (February/March)
- Easter – Practicing Resurrection (April)

May these times of prayer and reflection bless your vestry during these seasons of praise and worship.

Season of Creation

Begin by reading this theme text from this season's lectionary:

I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the Lord swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.” (Deuteronomy 30:15-20, from Proper 18C)

Opening Prayer

Almighty and Everliving God, you bring forth and sustain every living thing; help us grow in compassion and care for the multitude of your creatures, that we may see them not as objects for our use, but as brothers and sisters that sing your never-ending praise. Through Jesus Christ, our Shepherd and guide, who with you and the Spirit lives and reigns, one God, now and forever. (*Christ Church Cathedral, Indianapolis; Season of Creation 2021*)

Engagement Questions

Propose these questions to the vestry for a brief response: Name some people impacted by the decisions of this vestry? What animals and other living creatures are also impacted?

Reflection

Read this reflection to the vestry:

The Season of Creation is an annual, ecumenical time of prayer and action on behalf of creation.¹ It begins on September 1, the World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation, and ends on October 4, the Feast of St. Francis. The reading from Deuteronomy 30 brings the issue of *decision* strongly to our attention.

These words are God's. In context, God is addressing the people of Israel, saying to them that *choosing life*—loving and obeying God—results in thriving: long life, full life, and life that the next generation can inherit. Choosing *against* life, however, results in the opposite: loss, interruption, and a failure to hand off to the next generation.

God has provided a home for the people of Israel, a land flowing with milk and honey. God has also given instruction so that they know how to manage the land; and God has led them through many challenges to reach this moment. Now God exhorts them to choose life.

The scripture passage we read talks about blessings and curses, life and length of days. It has human flourishing and longevity in mind. But actually, the decisions we make impact far more than just the

¹ Ecumenical Patriarch Dimitrios I proclaimed 1 September as a day of prayer for creation for the Orthodox in 1989. Christians worldwide have since embraced and expanded the season as part of their annual calendar. For more information see, seasonofcreation.org.

human community. The choices of Israel in Deuteronomy ripple out to affect the whole land and all its inhabitants, the fruit of the ground and the increase of the livestock (Deut 28:4). Likewise, the choices we make today as a parish ripple out to affect the whole nonhuman realm. What we determine to do with our buildings, lands, and waterways impact all the living creatures whose homes are there. We can choose life with them and for them—or we can choose *against* life, resulting in loss, interruption, and degradation.

Discussion Questions

Lead the vestry in one or both of the following questions:

- How do the parish's building and grounds interact with living or nonliving creatures? With waterways and growing things?
- How might the parish, by its financial decisions or its programming, contribute to the thriving of other creatures?

Closing Prayer

Lead the vestry in this closing prayer:

God of compassion, have mercy upon us. Heal our relationship with all creation. Forgive us for our mistreatment and neglect of the creatures who share the earth with us. We are truly sorry and we humbly repent for what we have done to harm them, and for what we have not done to help them. Fill us with your Spirit, that we may care for one another and for all creatures, according to your will and in the fullness of your love; through Jesus Christ our Redeemer. (*Book of Occasional Services* p. 301)

St. Francis

Begin by reading this theme text from this season's lectionary:

Do not be ashamed, then, of the testimony about our Lord or of me his prisoner, but join with me in suffering for the gospel, relying on the power of God, who saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works but according to his own purpose and grace. (2 Timothy 1:8-9, from Proper 2C)

Opening Prayer

O heavenly Father, who has filled the world with beauty: Open our eyes to behold your gracious hand in all your works; that, rejoicing in your whole creation, we may learn to serve you with gladness; for the sake of him through whom all things were made, your Son Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (BCP p. 814)

Engagement Questions

Propose this question to the vestry for a brief response: If the vestry were given three sentences to explain the Christian gospel (good news) to a group of fifth graders, what would your three sentences be?

Reflection

Read this reflection to the vestry:

The first four epistle readings from the Sunday lectionary for the month of October come from 2 Timothy and frequently mention "the gospel." We hear admonitions such as:

- *Join with me in suffering for the gospel, relying on the power of God. (Pentecost 17)*
- *Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead. . . that is my gospel (Pentecost 18)*

The writer admonishes the readers to stand firm for the gospel and hold it fast; to remember and remind. But let's revisit just what that good news is. In the one-minute gospel that the vestry proposed to the fifth-grade class, what good news for creation did it include? As you named Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, what hope was included for life on earth and the rest of creation?

In both the Old and New Testaments, we find good news for all creation. Often the church reads right past them. But listen for the good news for all creatures in passages like these:

Colossians 1:19-20: *For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.*

Romans 8:19-23: *For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, . . ., in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.*

What difference might it make in our day if the church were to more vigorously include this aspect of the gospel in its testimony and mission? St. Francis saw God's love and grace as fully extended to all things as fellow worshippers and congregants of God's beloved kingdom. This view of the gospel led him to refer to the sun, moon, animals, plants and trees as brothers and sisters in Christ. Just as Jesus saw each flower and bird as fed and cared for by God the Father, St. Francis saw each one also as fellow parishioners, members of the choir and worshippers of God.

The apostle Paul calls the church to be "witnesses" to the gospel. St. Francis is often attributed (falsely, it turns out) as the author of the saying, "Preach the gospel always; use words if necessary." No matter the original source, this admonition still speaks to the heart of the church's mission. How does the church preach good news with its practices and choices?

If God's good news of redemption includes life beyond human society, then how can Christians and the churches live as witnesses to that good news? What testimony can be proclaimed by word and deed for the earth and all its creatures?

Discussion Questions

Lead the vestry in discussion of one or more of these questions:

- If your parish were to decide to improve its witness to God's good news to all creation, what changes might you make to various places in the building? On the property? In policy?
- If the church were to view its surrounding community of creatures, plants and soil as fellow congregants who are loved and blessed by God, how might the church better extend hospitality and welcome to them? What changes could be made?

Closing Prayer

Lead the vestry in this closing prayer:

Lord, make this vestry an instrument of your peace;
Where there is hatred, let us sow love; Where there is injury, pardon;
Where there is error, the truth; Where there is doubt, the faith;
Where there is despair, hope; Where there is darkness, light; And where there is sadness, joy.
O Divine Master, Grant that we not so much seek to be consoled, as to console;
To be understood, as to understand; To be loved as to love.
For it is in giving that we receive; It is in pardoning that we are pardoned;
And it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen.

(adapted from the prayer often attributed to St. Francis)

Advent

Begin by reading this theme text from this season's lectionary:

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water; the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp, the grass shall become reeds and rushes. Like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing. (Isaiah 35:1-2, from Advent 3A)

Opening Prayer

Almighty and Everliving God, ruler of all things in heaven and earth, hear our prayers for this parish family. Strengthen the faithful, arouse the careless, and restore the penitent. Grant us all things necessary for our common life, and bring us all to be of one heart and mind within your holy Church; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (BCP p. 817)

Engagement Questions

Propose these questions to the vestry for a brief response: Name one of the most hope-filled decisions this vestry has ever made. What role did hope play in making that decision?

Reflection

Read this reflection to the vestry:

Advent is understood as a season of waiting and expectation. A time to revisit and clarify the hopes and dreams grounded in Emmanuel, God with us. The readings for the season are full of predictions and admonitions to prepare for something coming. God's work in the world will soon be manifest. Get ready for it. Churches understand this pretty well and recognize the birth of the Christ child as the beginning of God's new day. We do well to celebrate this in song and sacrament.

But what is more challenging is to know what to *do* with those hopeful expectations beyond the music and message of the worship service. What does such preparation look like in community life? How does it manifest in choices made? How do we *live* into Advent hope?

More practically, for what do vestries wait and hope? They make plans and secure resources based on hopes and expectations. Hopeful vestries include in their budgets money for the things hoped for: education of children, resources for outreach and mercy, and funding for fellowship and worship. They work to find ways to express the church's faith and love in buildings and grounds, art, beauty, care and play. They ensure that hospitality and fellowship are well resourced and managed. Hopeful vestries understand these connections between hopes, dreams, and practical decisions.

In vestries, Advent hope plays out in concrete decisions. This year, the hope and expectations of Isaiah fill the season. Those hopes and visions are very earthy ones. They look for a coming time of justice and renewal not only for human society, but also for the whole earth. The fields and wild places, animals

wild and domestic, and the waters and weather will all manifest God's coming action. The land will heal and will join in song and praise. When God is born among us, all creation responds.

Discussion Questions

Lead the vestry in discussion of one or more of these questions:

- What opportunities exist at your church to express gladness and abundance for all of God's creation?
- Are there ways to express Advent hope for God's coming blessing for the wilderness, waters, grasses and reeds?
- Where are opportunities to express this around the building, the worship space and fellowship spaces?

Closing Prayer

Lead the vestry in this closing prayer:

Holy God, you alone are unutterable, from the time you created all things that can be spoken of.

You alone are unknowable, from the time you created all things that can be known.

All things cry out about you: those that speak, and those that cannot speak.

All things honor you: those that think, and those that cannot think.

For there is one longing, one groaning, which all things have for you.

All things that comprehend your plan pray to you and offer you a silent hymn.

In you, the One, all things abide, and all things endlessly run to you who are the end of all. *Amen.*

(source: Gregory of Nazianzus, Book of Occasional Services p. 297)

Epiphany

Begin by reading this theme text from this season's lectionary:

With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? . . . He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6:6-8, from Epiphany 4A)

Opening Prayer

Almighty and Everliving God, source of all wisdom and understanding, be present with us as we take counsel as the vestry for the renewal and mission of your Church. Teach us in all things to seek first your honor and glory. Guide us to perceive what is right, and grant us both the courage to pursue it and the grace to accomplish it; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen. (BCP p. 818)*

Engagement Questions

Propose this question to the vestry for a brief response: What is the most important value a vestry should apply to its decisions?

Reflection

Read this reflection to the vestry:

During this Epiphany season, the readings reflect some of the most beloved and challenging texts in the Jewish and Christian scriptures. Key challenges of true religion are set before us:

- Micah 6 – With what shall I come before the Lord?
- Psalm 15 – Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord?
- Isaiah 58 – What is the fast God chooses?
- Matthew 6 – Who are the truly blessed?
- Deuteronomy 30 – How might we choose life?

These fundamental questions of truth and integrity certainly apply to the work of vestries. Every decision a vestry makes is a faith decision. What does the list of vestry decisions bring before the Lord? Do they reflect the fast God would choose? Are they in accord with true blessedness? Are they life giving? Can this vestry ascend the hill of the Lord?

In our day most people are aware of the degrading and devastating impacts of pollution, overheated consumption, and habitat loss upon the life systems of planet earth. Each hurricane, drought, fire and famine reveals the injustices of human society that are tipping the balance of life systems into crises. Many of those habits are perpetuated by a few upon the many in cycles of greed and exploitation.

One does not have to be a “tree hugger” or environmental activist to connect the dots between issues of eco-justice and pervasive greed. Those who benefit most from the consumption of the earth suffer the

least of its consequences. The impacts affect first all the poor and powerless; human and non-human. And if God loves all that God has made and has extended grace to all living things, to what degree should God's people be concerned with the suffering of those living things?

In what ways do the mandates of being kind, breaking bonds of oppression, clothing the naked, and feeding the hungry extend also to the rest of creation? Where do they fit into the church's call to mission and a life of obedience? What is the role of the Christian church in taking healing actions toward them?

If such actions of justice and kindness are part of the church's mission, then vestries certainly play a part. Vestries make decisions that either support or neglect the parish's work of justice, love, and kindness. Since vestries participate in breaking bonds of injustice, sharing bread with the hungry and clothing the naked, what kinds of support might they also give to efforts of eco-justice?

Discussion Questions

Lead the vestry in discussion of one or more of these questions:

- How can this church be a more forceful witness to true religion and justice for all creation?
- What actions does this vestry already take in seeking justice, humility, and righteousness for all living things?
- Are there particular local opportunities to seek justice and kindness for all creation?

Closing Prayer

Lead the vestry in this closing prayer:

Eternal God, the light of all who know you, come and fill our hearts with your love. Help us speak when many keep silent, help us stand for what is right when many sit in indifference. Increase our faith and charity, until your kingdom comes and heaven and earth rejoice in everlasting glory; through your Son, our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

(source: Anne Kelsey, *Book of Occasional Services* p. 297)

Lent

Begin by reading this theme text from this season's lectionary:

The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. And the Lord God commanded the man, "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die." (Genesis 2:15-17, from Lent 1A)

Opening Prayer

Lord of the harvest, make us faithful stewards in the labor you have called us to share, planting and cultivating, planning and protecting, and offering to you the return that you require, through our Savior, Jesus Christ, and in the power of the Holy Spirit, now and for ever. Amen (*Prayers on a Garden Theme, Anglican Church of Australia*)

Engagement Questions

Propose this question to the vestry for a brief response: List some ways tilling and keeping the earth has been a part of the mission of this church?

Reflection

Read this reflection to the vestry:

Lent is a season of fasting and repentance. During this time we seek to decenter ourselves and recenter on God. We don't usually think of Genesis chapter 2 as a Lenten text or connect it to a Lenten discipline of decentering, but it is relevant to them both. The story of Genesis 2 tells us something deep and true about our calling as humans. God took the first human and put him in the garden *to till and to keep it*.

Why did God do that? A couple verses earlier, Genesis provides a reason: "no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no vegetation of the field had yet sprung up—for the Lord God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no one to till the ground" (Gen 2:5). At this early moment of creation, God held off on growing plants and vegetation because the earth lacked a gardener. God needed to ensure there was someone on hand to manage and cultivate all the vegetation. In other words, God did not fashion the earth and its greenery for the sake of the human being. The plants weren't made to feed humans. Rather, in this story, God fashioned the human for the sake of earth and its greenery. God meant for this first human to be a gift and a help to earth. And that fundamental relationship from the original creation remains. This is why the earth and all creation rejoices when God's righteousness is restored. We are still to be a blessing to the earth. This is still what God intends for modern-day humans, too.

This is a radical decentering of the human enterprise. We are used to the other Genesis text, when God tells humans to subdue the earth and have dominion over it (Gen 1:28). But that is only one side of the story. The other is here in Genesis 2. During Lent we hear Christ's call: you are not your own (1 Cor

6:19). You belong to Christ; you belong to one another. You are called to serve. And Genesis 2 adds a further dimension: you are called by God to serve the earth; to till and to keep it; to manage and cultivate it.

Discussion Questions

Lead the vestry in discussion of one or more of these questions:

- What is the role of this vestry in tilling and keeping, in stewarding the natural community and vegetation growing on church property, or in the area around the church?
- What vestry decisions involve this calling?

Closing Prayer

Lead the vestry in this closing prayer:

Bountiful God, you call us to labor with you in tending the earth: Where we lack love, open our hearts to the world; where we waste, give us discipline to conserve; where we neglect, awaken our minds and wills to insight and care. May we with all your creatures honor and serve you in all things for you live and reign with Christ, Redeemer of all, and with your Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

(Book of Occasional Services, p. 291)

Easter

Begin by reading this theme text from this season's lectionary:

If you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory. (Colossians 3:1-4, from Easter Day A)

Opening Prayer

We praise you, God, that the light of Christ shines in our darkness and is never overcome; show us the way we must go to eternal day; though Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen (*New Zealand Prayer Book* p. 598)

Engagement Questions

Propose this question to the vestry for a brief response: Survey the vestry with this question: Is this vestry motivated more by: 1) Joy or 2) Duty?

Reflection

Who you *most truly are* is safe and secure. This is a big part of the message of the letter to the Colossians. You might think that you need to become a better Christian, pray more, give more, do more. But Colossians says: "Don't put up with anyone pressuring you in details of diet, worship services, or holy days" (2:16 The Message). You don't need to prove that you belong to God. Instead, you need to *receive* who you are. That's a key word in Colossians: receive. Open your spirit; welcome who you most truly are, because it is already safe and secure. You have been buried with Christ in baptism (Col 2:12). You have been raised with Christ (3:1). Your life, your truest identity as God's beloved child, is hidden with Christ in God. Now it's just about getting in sync with that.

This message is true of us individually. It is also true of this vestry and this parish. Its truest identity is safe and secure. It is a part of Christ's own beloved body, which he "tenderly cares for" (Eph 5:29). It is, in the words of Colossians, "nourished and held together" by Christ and it "grows with a growth that is from God" (2:19). Our job is to *receive* that identity. To open ourselves to that truth. To try and let it govern our decisions. How different might our meetings be if we were deeply persuaded that our work is just to simply receive Christ's care? To channel Christ's nourishing? To allow the growth that God is growing?

But Colossians doesn't just have individual believers or the church in mind. The message that our true selves are already safe and secure applies to *all of creation*. Colossians says that all things, whether visible or invisible, were created in Christ (1:16). More than that, it says that "through Christ, God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things" (1:20). All creatures are reconciled. The gospel is proclaimed to "every creature under heaven" (1:23). This means that when we think about the church lands, the trees and animals, the rivers or hills around town; we need to *receive* their identity, too. They too are

included in Christ's death and resurrection. They too are beloved and reconciled. Their life is also hidden in Christ with God. So how might we recognize, name and celebrate that? How can we, by word and deed, align with this truth about our nonhuman neighbors?

Discussion Questions

Lead the vestry in discussion of one or more of these questions:

- How does this vestry help the church accept God's grace and the gift of being? Where are there misalignments?
- How does this church honor the being of other creatures as fellows that Christ has also lovingly reconciled to God? Where are opportunities to give greater honor?

Closing Prayer

Lead the vestry in this closing prayer:

O God of unchangeable power and eternal light: Look favorably on your whole Church, that wonderful and sacred mystery; by the effectual working of your providence, carry out in tranquility the plan of salvation; let the whole world see and know that things which were cast down are being raised up, and things which had grown old are being made new, and that all things are being brought to their perfection by him through whom all things were made, your Son Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

(Easter Vigil, BCP p. 291)

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Evaluation and Feedback

Please rate your experience with these devotionals (1 = Not at all, 5 = Very much):

These devotionals were engaging and held interest.

1 2 3 4 5

These devotionals inspired helpful reflection and discussion.

1 2 3 4 5

These devotionals fit the time available for the meeting.

1 2 3 4 5

These devotionals were easy to use.

1 2 3 4 5

Comments and suggestions: