

OUTDOOR RETREAT

DEEPENING OUR RELATIONSHIP
WITH GOD AND NATURE



This outdoor retreat is divided into three parts. So, figure out three stopping points along your hiking route where you'll stop, reflect, and pray. Or divide your outdoor activity into three parts – swim in the ocean, rest, swim some more, etc. You can use this retreat on your own or with friends!

GETTING STARTED

Take a few moments to experience the beauty of nature all around you:

- ❖ *Go to a favorite place outdoors – perhaps a hiking trail, a local river or lake, a nearby beach, or a park.*
- ❖ *Sit for a few moments and listen to the sounds of nature around you and try to let go of any anxiety, stress, or nervousness that might be distracting you.*

Settle into the moment:

- ❖ *Close your eyes and breathe deeply.*
- ❖ *Recognize that God is with you.*

PRAYER

Good and loving God, during the summer months we find ourselves outdoors and more in touch with creation. From the towering mountains to the powerful oceans, we see the great diversity in your creation. In the sweetness of honey or fresh picked fruit, we taste the treats that you created to nourish us. All around us, in the sounds of the wind, animals nearby, or even the laughter of children, we hear the world buzzing with all you have created. God, we pause today to thank you for the beauty and grace that surrounds us and recognize that we often overlook these graces or fail to appreciate that all we have is a gift from you.

What beauties and graces are present in your daily life that you might not always appreciate?

PRAY: I am sorry for the times when I failed to recognize ...

PRAYING WITH SCRIPTURE AND NATURE

Throughout the Bible, nature is constantly mediating our relationship with God. Biblical authors draw on imagery and experiences with nature to craft beautiful metaphors that help them to better explain the power and grace of God. At the same time, many of the stories in the Bible depict God as speaking through nature to the prophets and other important figures. Pope Francis recently commented on this special relationship between humans and the environment [saying](#), “When we talk about the environment, about creation, my thoughts turn to the first pages of the Bible, the Book of Genesis, which states that God placed man and woman on earth to cultivate and care for it.” He goes on to explain, “Cultivating and caring for creation is God’s indication given to each one of us not only at the beginning of history; it is part of His project; it means nurturing the world with responsibility and transforming it into a garden, a habitable place for everyone.”

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Summer is a perfect time to explore our relationship with God's creation more intentionally and ask ourselves how we may or may not be truly cultivating the environment as God would want. At the same time, as we pause in prayer and take time to re-appreciate creation, we are able to cultivate our own relationship with God. Looking more closely at scripture, it is not difficult to see why the biblical authors found so much revelation in nature around them. As we too seek to experience God in nature, we'll use senses – sight, hearing, and smell. Let's get started.

PART I: SEEING GOD



Begin your walk and along the way look around you for all the ways that God surrounds you in creation – animals, plants, the sky above, other people you encounter, etc.

SCRIPTURE READING: Psalm 104:10-17

He sends forth springs in the valleys;
They flow between the mountains;
They give drink to every beast of the field;
The wild donkeys quench their thirst.
Beside them the birds of the heavens dwell;
They lift up their voices among the branches.
He waters the mountains from His upper chambers;
The earth is satisfied with the fruit of His works.

He causes the grass to grow for the cattle,
And vegetation for the labor of man,
So that he may bring forth food from the earth,
And wine which makes man's heart glad,
So that he may make his face glisten with oil,
And food which sustains man's heart.
The trees of the LORD drink their fill,
The cedars of Lebanon which He planted,
Where the birds build their nests,
And the stork, whose home is the fir tree

REFLECTING ON SCRIPTURE

This psalm draws our attention to the beautiful balance in nature. Every animal and plant flourishes and is nourished by God's love. Look around you – *slowly and carefully* – taking time to notice all of the different plants and animals nearby. Make a mental note or jot down in your journal every plant or animal you see. How might you, like the psalmist, recognize and praise the wondrous creation God has provided and ordered for us on a daily basis? Nature flourishes with every being in its rightful place. Pope Francis challenges us and **asks** if we are tending to this balance: "Are we truly cultivating and caring for creation? Or are we exploiting and neglecting it?" How would you answer these questions for yourself? For the global community?

PRAYING FOR CREATION

God, we thank you for the gift of sight, which allows us to witness your amazing creation. Loving Creator, we thank you for the diversity of plants that feed and shelter all of your creatures in unique ways. God, we thank you for all of the animals that share this planet with us, each a testimony to your incredible creativity and grace. Amen.

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PART 2: LISTENING TO GOD



Continue your walk, and this time listen and pay particular attention to all the different sounds of God in nature. Think about what these sounds of creation are saying to you.

SCRIPTURE READING: Psalm 98:4-9

Shout joyfully to the LORD, all the earth;
Break forth and sing for joy and sing praises.
Sing praises to the LORD with the lyre,
With the lyre and the sound of melody.
With trumpets and the sound of the horn
Shout joyfully before the King, the LORD.

Let the sea roar and all it contains,
The world and those who dwell in it.
Let the rivers clap their hands,
Let the mountains sing together for joy
Before the LORD, for He is coming to judge the earth;
He will judge the world with righteousness
And the peoples with equity.

REFLECTING ON SCRIPTURE

The flourishing of creation, with its symphony of sounds, gives praise and glory to God who created it. In this psalm, we experience all of nature singing with joy and thanksgiving, from human music to the music of the Earth itself. Listen closely to creation moving around you – the wind in the trees or the sound of moving water, the animals around you or the voices of people nearby. Can you hear the whole Earth singing in praise of God? Where does your voice fit into this momentous praise? What keeps nature from being able to sing for joy?

PRAYING FOR CREATION

God, we thank you for the gift of hearing, which allows us to listen to the world singing its praises for you. Loving Creator, we thank you for the orchestra of insects, birds, and other animals that fills our days and nights with such a diversity of sound. God, we thank you for the sounds of the water and the wind, always moving and rarely silent, which bring us life. Amen.

PART 3: BREATHING IN GOD



Begin walking once more. Breathe deeply, taking in the scents and smells of nature. Think about things that might make it hard for you and other parts of God's creation to breathe.

Scripture Reading: Song of Solomon 4:16

Awake, O north wind,
And come, wind of the south;
Make my garden breathe out fragrance,
Let its spices be wafted abroad.
May my beloved come into his garden
And eat its choice fruits!



REFLECTING ON SCRIPTURE

The wise King Solomon writes extensively on love, and here we see him reflecting on an encounter with God's great love in the scents of a garden. Take a few deep breaths – inhaling the summer air and exhaling any anxiety, stress, or uncertainty that may still cling to you. Smell the clean crisp air mixing with the fragrances of the plants around you. What does God's love – in the nature around you – smell like? Think about examples of human pollution filling the air and making it difficult to encounter God's love through these fragrances of nature. How might you work to reduce such pollution and cultivate and care for God's creation?

PRAYING FOR CREATION

God, we thank you for the gift of each breath, which gives us life and brings with it all the aromas of our world. Loving Creator, we thank you for the wind that moves across the earth, bringing us scents and life-giving oxygen. God, we thank you for the diversity of flowers, fruits, and all of the sweet fragrances that reflect the complexity of your creation. Amen.

GOD IS WITH US...

We can learn so much about our personal relationship with God by being attentive to nature around us. God cares so dearly for us that all of creation can draw us closer to its creator; it beckons us to recognize how much God cares for us. And we can express our love for God through our relationship with the environment. All of nature is a gift from God, one that we are tasked with "cultivating," as [Pope Francis](#) put it. As we see, hear, and breathe in the wonders of creation, at the same time we are called to nurture and care for it. Think about the ways you might daily cultivate your relationship with creation – and with God. Your challenge: Pick one small doable action that in its own way cultivates creation and add it to your daily routine for the next month (and beyond).

CONCLUSION

When you're ready, take a few more deep breaths and thank God for accompanying you on this journey into nature.