

### OPENING HYMN

“O Blessed Spring” (ELW 447)

### OPENING PRAYER

O God, you give us your Son as the vine apart from whom we cannot live. Nourish our life in his resurrection, that we may bear the fruit of love and know the fullness of your joy, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen. (ELW, p. 34, prayer for Easter 5B)

### FOCUS VERSE

“I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.” (John 15:5)

### MATERIALS NEEDED

- Bibles (NRSV)
- *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (ELW)

### CLOSING PRAYER

Pray for the needs and joys of your Bible study group or circle. Then give thanks to God for the people and the plants with whom you abide—those whose life gives you life.

# Jesus and nature: Teachers of faith

## Session one

### Trees

BY SARA OLSON-SMITH

### INTRODUCTION

During worship, before we receive communion, we sing, “Heaven and earth are full of your glory.” In this way, we remember and repeat the psalmist’s declaration: “The heavens declare the glory of God, the skies proclaim God’s handiwork” (Psalm 19:1). In fact, Jesus says that if we are silent, even the stones will cry out in praise (Luke 19:40).

Heaven and earth. Skies and stones. God surrounds us with these great teachers: creatures and created things that bear witness to God’s power, creativity and goodness. And yet, we humans—even those of us who read Scripture—tend to ignore the testimonies of what surrounds us.

This fall we’ll turn our attention to the world God has made—not only because Scripture invites us, but also because Jesus draws us and the disciples to do so. So we will listen to the proclamations of the trees clapping their hands and the mountains and hills bursting in song (Isaiah 55:12). We will take seriously the location, geography and created world around Jesus, immersing ourselves in Jesus’ vision for us and the world. In this way, we’ll explore our deep kinship with the world, grow our wonder at creation and restore our commitment to advocate for the earth and all those who dwell in it.

In this first session, we’ll focus on trees, shrubs, vines and branches. Trees teach us how we are bound together and how mutuality gives us hope and moves us to action. It comes as no surprise that

Jesus talked a lot about trees, plants and other flora. (Perhaps Mary Magdalene confused the risen Christ with a gardener because she had so often heard him talking about plants? Or perhaps it was simply that encountering a gardener made more sense to her than encountering the resurrected Lord!)

## A GRAPEVINE MEANS HOME

📖 **Read:** John 15:1–11

### **Share aloud or reflect:**

1. Have you ever seen, touched, smelled or tended a grapevine? Have you only seen grapes in a grocery store? What do you imagine a grapevine needs to grow?

Imagine: Jesus has just eaten his last meal with his friends. Their feet are still warm and clean from being washed by him with tender care. As Jesus begins his farewell discourse, speaking of vines, branches and fruit, his friends may be holding cups of wine, with pitchers nearby for refills. They can literally smell and taste what he is speaking of.

Living in a society where most people farmed, grew their own food and tended animals, Jesus' friends would have been familiar with vineyards. While only the wealthy might own an entire vineyard, others were likely to have a vine or two of their own to tend. As Jesus and his friends traveled and taught, they may have even been recruited to help harvest grapes, carrying out the joyous communal work of crushing them to make wine.

Spinach can be planted and, weeks later, result in delicious salads. Grapevines, however, are tended for generations. Years of tending and nurturing are required before these plants are ready to produce fruit. Grapes are an investment—of land, water and time. In Scripture, grapevines are connected to coming home and being settled. For example, in

Genesis 9, after Noah exits the ark and sets foot on land, the first thing he does is plant a grapevine (v. 20). After a long, terrifying time of uncertainty, planting the grapevine is an act of investing in the future.

Speaking of scary, uncertain times, Jesus' friends lived under Roman occupation in Palestine and would soon experience even more upheaval after Jesus' arrest. Yet Jesus gathers his friends to share supper and a message: He is the vine and they are the branches. In other words, Jesus is something lasting for generations, planted with hope for an abundant future. Even when he is no longer with his friends, he remains with them and us. Not even death can change the way Jesus' love holds us all. The joy of Jesus will be in us, growing until it is complete, full.

### **Share aloud or reflect:**

2. Can you think of a time when, despite life's uncertainties, God's presence gave you a sense of being settled or rooted?

## ABIDING IN JESUS

We spend a lot of time in the woods with our elementary-age children. My 7-year-old son doesn't hike, but he hunts for treasures. Collecting rocks and moss, bark and dead insects, he stuffs these into his pockets to proudly display later on shelves. Mostly he loves sticks. He will look until he finds a walking stick, a magic wand or a branch that curves like a bow.

On a walk last spring, my son found a branch that had broken off from our neighbor's blossoming apple tree. Carefully, he brought it home and placed it in a jar of water. At first, I thought he just liked the blossoms. But after the flowers fell, he continued to water the branch. When I asked about it, he said that if we waited long enough, the branch would become a tree and we'd get some apples. We

just had to keep it well watered.

I had to explain to him that the branch, on its own, could not produce fruit. Branches need to be connected to the tree. Looking at the end of the branches, I showed him the xylem and phloem—the vascular system that brings water, sugars and minerals to the fruit and leaves of a tree. “Like our blood vessels!” he exclaimed, excited that humans and trees share something. We went outside and looked at the branches of bushes and trees, seeing how they connect and grow.

Jesus calls this “abiding”—in other words, staying connected or remaining attached. The Greek word for this, *meno*, appears more than 40 times in John’s Gospel, and eight times in these verses. Abiding is what Jesus does with us. It’s how we, as followers, are to live with him. Like a branch on a vine, we bear fruit, make meaning and find life and joy by abiding, staying, remaining with Jesus.

With Jesus, we find the goodness and grace of abundant life. Without Jesus, we’re just sticks. It sounds remarkably passive. Branches simply stick on the vine, receiving all the goodness they need to grow fruit. According to Jesus, this is who we are too. We are to remain with Jesus and soak up his love for us, like a branch on a vine.

### Share aloud or reflect:

3. When do you feel most connected to God? Are there spiritual practices that help you to draw God’s love into yourself?

### PRUNING

When I think of grapevines, I imagine the warm climates of Napa Valley or southern France, regions with ideal growing seasons, rich soil, plenty of sunshine and rain. However, even these places are facing a changing climate, with more heat and less water each year, making grapes vulnerable.

(Those with Twitter accounts may wish to search #savethewhalesandthewine.) In Jesus’ day, as today, Palestine’s climate and geography posed a challenge for grape growers. Even then, farmers faced very little rainfall, few water sources, and rocky terrain, with much topsoil lost due to generations of cultivation.

In an environment so hostile to growing, the subsistence farmers of Jesus’ time would have needed to be particularly gifted with farming tools and techniques. Vines would be carefully pruned so as not to waste that precious water, so the power of the sun could reach all the way down the roots. Then vibrant buds, branches and leaves could emerge, and healthy fruit could grow. For vinegrowers, pruning is key.

In the movie “Sideways,” two friends tour the vineyards of California. At one point, one of the friends, Miles, expresses his passion about his favorite variety of grape: “Pinot needs specific care and attention,” he says. “... Only the most patient and nurturing growers can do it, really. Only someone who takes time to understand pinot’s potential can coax it into its fullest potential.”

Again, it’s not happenstance that Jesus gives us the image of a vine and its branches. Jesus knows it takes lots of care to grow grapes—especially in a harsh environment. People of Jesus’ time would have resonated with the powerful, layered imagery of Jesus as the vine and God as the vine grower—the One who prunes and tends the vine, the One who is a patient and nurturing grower. Jesus lets us know just how much God cares for us, tends to us and wants to coax us into reaching our fullest potential!

God does not prune us by making terrible things happen to us to teach us a lesson. Instead, Jesus says we are pruned and cleansed by the word he speaks. Jesus invites us to see what in our lives siphons off precious energy and needs to be let go. Jesus’ words encourage us to look at the parts of us that are dried out and brittle, so we may pull back

and rest again in God's care. After all, the best vine growers are not just wise pruners, but those who are gifted at grafting.

**Share aloud or reflect:**

4. Ask a gardener (someone in your group or someone else you know) to share what they see as the biggest challenge of pruning. Then take a few minutes to journal about your own experience: Have you ever had to cut off behaviors, attitudes or perspectives of yours that were harmful to you or others? How did this make space for new fruit to grow? (Share as much, or as little, as you feel comfortable.)
5. Have you ever felt cut off from and then, later, regrafted to your community or your faith? What new fruit, if any, came from this experience?

**Y'ALL ARE BRANCHES!**

It's virtually impossible to distinguish one grapevine from another among a mix of twisted, intertwined branches and fruits. Each originates from the main vine, but all are bound up in one another, with no hierarchy or fruit-bearing champion. All the branches work together, depending on each other and the vine. Jesus' words are directed to the plural "you," as in "y'all." You all are branches. You all abide in me, and I abide in you all. You all bear fruit.

These images from nature name the deeply communal, mutual relationship that we have, not only with Jesus, but with one another. We draw love, grace, joy from Jesus the vine, and then together we bear fruit. In John 15, Jesus prunes us from our thinking about faith as a solitary or individual act. Our faith and our ability to bear fruit depend on all the ways we together abide in Jesus, and in one another.

**Share aloud or reflect:**

6. List one or more ways in which abiding in community deepens your faith. How might working together multiply the fruit we bear?
7. Can Jesus' words in John 15 help us expand this vision of interdependence to include the created world? If we were to include creation, how would that shape our actions toward creation and toward each other?

**ABUNDANT SHRUBS OF GOODNESS**

📖 **Read:** Mark 4:30–32

I laugh every time I read that "the reign of God is like a shrub." This is no parable about the strength of cedars or the beauty of lilies. Where we might want to envision God's actions as fancy, powerful or impressive, Jesus describes God's love as scrappy and gritty. The description gets even better when we learn that in those days, a mustard plant was a nuisance—a weed, even! These tiny seeds would land in soil and grow prolifically, like creeping Charlie or an invasive species. Not only that, but a mustard shrub could grow to be as big as a modern-day garage.

As Jesus talks, he compares the reign of God to an unintended shrub, one that grows and grows until it becomes a home for birds. It's a playful, almost laughable image. And yet, isn't this how it is with God's work in this world? God's work comes into being in ways we don't always choose, disrupting our carefully planted rows of plans. Yet somehow it brings about life and joy, creating a space of safety and goodness for all creation.

New Testament scholar Amy-Jill Levine, writing from her own Jewish perspective, says this parable invites us to "get out of the way" of God's

work of bringing life and wholeness to the world. She explains: “The kingdom [of God] is present when humanity and nature work together, and we do what we were put here to do—to go out on a limb to provide for others, and ourselves as well.” (*Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi*, HarperOne, 2014, p. 167).

Humanity and nature working together reminds me of friends of our family who have spent years nurturing their acreage, working to return it to the long-grass prairie that once thrived in our part of eastern Iowa. Over the years, as wildflowers, shrubs and grasses grew, they’ve also seen the return of creatures—pollinators and songbirds, rodents and raptors. While we need cultivated lands to feed the world, we also need places where seeds take root on their own, where native species thrive, where things grow not because they were planned but because they belong. We need more places for birds and creatures to make nests and find homes.

**Share aloud or reflect:**

8. Share a time when goodness came because of something in your life that, at first, seemed to be a nuisance or uprooted your careful plans. What was the goodness that came about?
9. How might our carefully planned gardens and lives (both of which are generally planned with some degree of self-serving) keep out other lives or other possibilities? How might allowing God’s reign to take root in our lives allow for creation and others to thrive?

**ABUNDANT SHRUBS OF GOODNESS**

📖 **Read:** Mark 11:12–14, 20–24 and Revelation 22:1–5

**Share aloud or reflect:**

10. How do the trees described in these two passages differ from each other? What can they teach us about the world as it is now, and the world as it will be?

Here we read about two kinds of trees at two different moments in time. First, Jesus comes upon a fig tree after his triumphal entry into Jerusalem (which we celebrate on Palm Sunday), just days before his death. Jesus understands that his arrest and trial are drawing near. He must have some glimmer of hope for humanity, that it might yet be possible that people would turn around, understand his mission and follow his way of self-giving love. When Jesus sees that the fig tree has leaves, even though it is not the season for fruit, he still hopes to find some. But it has no fruit. Jesus has this hope that the thriving tree would bear fruit out of season—a sign that God’s people are finally ready and he will not have to endure the cross and death.

According to David Rhoads, “The expectation Mark implies here is that when the rule of God comes fully, trees will flourish and bear fruit all year long—as the author of Revelation imagines it in his vision of the new Jerusalem” (from “Who Will Speak for the Sparrow? Eco-Justice Criticism of the New Testament,” *Literary Encounters with the Reign of God*, T&T Clark, 2004).

This fig tree bears witness to the brokenness of humanity. So do trees today, as they continue to wither due to humanity’s harmful acts of overconsumption, deforestation and pollution. Trees bear the scars of toxins in the air. They burn by the hundreds in forest fires. They are brought down to clear acres for more production of food, more production of stuff. Trees tell the story of our human disobedience and our denial of God and the world we are called to tend.

And yet, the vision of Revelation invites us into



hope and spurs us into action. In the world as it will be in that great Someday, the author of Revelation envisions a tree of life that bears fruit in every month of the year. This abundance of food means there is more than enough for everyone. On that tree are leaves that will bring healing to the nations.

Barbara Rossing writes: “Notice the healing comes not directly from God or the Lamb, not from some distant absent future time, but through the actual created world—through the leaves of a living tree. This is another signal of how God loves creation and still calls it good” (*The Rapture Exposed: The Message of Hope in the Book of Revelation*, Westview, 2004, p. 156).

The tree of life will bring healing. Trees already do. After all, it is through trees that this world breathes. We are utterly dependent on them. Not only do they give us the oxygen we need to breathe; they bring joy in their beauty. Trees provide shade and prevent water run off. There is no way to live, much less thrive, without trees. Our lives are bound up together. We are mutually dependent.

Notice how when Jesus calls out the withered tree and exposes our brokenness, in that same moment he invites his friends to hope in possibility. Jesus says, “Have faith in God. Truly, if you say to this mountain, ‘Be taken up and thrown into the sea,’ ... it will be done for you” (Mark 11:23).

The healing we long for, the healing of a broken world and a suffering creation, can come about when humanity works with boldness and faith. What seems impossible is not with God. With deep faith, persistent hope and much courage, trees will no longer wither, and our predicted climate destruction may be undone.

### Share aloud or reflect:

11. What is withering the trees and other parts of creation in your community? How might you work to counter the devastation

of trees in your region and elsewhere?

12. Where do you find hope or healing for yourself and the planet? How can this hope be a catalyst for healing actions?

### CONCLUSION

As a child, I attended Rainbow Trail Lutheran Camp in southern Colorado every summer. One year I went on a small hike with the naturalist on staff. During the previous year, a forest fire had come perilously close to the camp (a tragic reality that has happened again, since that time). She led us through the burn area. In the middle of that barren space of charred forest was a patch of tiny dancing green leaves. It stood out brightly against the blackened toothpicks of burned tree trunks. The new, toddler-sized trees were aspen. As their characteristic white trunks and leaves swayed in the breeze, the naturalist explained that aspens are usually the first trees to return after a fire. Aspens are so resilient, she said, because they are not solitary. Beneath the soil, aspens have massive, interconnected roots, making them among the world’s largest organisms. As a single seedling grows, it sends out root suckers that grow into other trees. One tree could have hundreds of shoots growing in a radius of up to 130 feet away from it. Even if one tree dies, or if a forest fire burns, aspens can grow right up from their roots. As a matter of fact, there is actually a colony (or clone) of aspens in Utah thought to span over 100 acres, with more than 40,000 trees.

I remember the naturalist told us that the church is like those aspens. We are all connected by our shared faith in Jesus, giving us strength and support even through hard times. Our shared roots provide hope when everything seems lost, and courage when we are afraid. Our roots are shared not only with other people of faith, but with all humanity and all creation. Thanks be to God, our interrootedness gives us strength. 🌿

# Jesus and nature: Teachers of faith

## Session one

### Trees

BY SARA OLSON-SMITH

#### OVERVIEW

Through vines, branches, mustard shrubs and fig trees, Jesus teaches us about our reliance on God and on one another. This session first explores Jesus' description (in John 15) of himself as the vine and us as the branches. We will see how "abiding" takes on deeper meaning given the context of farming practices and the biology of vines. Looking at the parable of the mustard shrub, we'll consider how God's reign expands like a weed to make space for abundant life. Finally, we'll compare the withered fig tree Jesus encounters with the Tree of Life in the book of Revelation, which will teach us about God's hope for a future where humanity and all creation will thrive.

#### Session goals:

- Practice a way of reading Scripture that takes into consideration the environment in which Jesus lived, one that also shaped his teaching.
- Notice the ways in which our lives are interdependent—with other human beings and with creation.
- Expand our understanding of God's work in our lives and in the world.
- Renew our motivation to work for the care and future of this planet and its trees, vines, prairies and other plant-life.

#### A DEEPER INTRODUCTION

As a child, I learned Bible stories with the advanced

technology of the early 1980s: flannel boards. Back then, Jesus and his friends were just flat people on a pale, blue background. Once in a while, say if the story involved Zacchaeus or fishing, we might also get a tree, a house or maybe a boat. Sometimes, we still read the Bible in this way, when we remove Jesus and his words from not only his historical context, but also his created one. But Jesus was incarnate. This means he was in and of this world. He was shaped not only by the sociopolitical world, but by growing up in the semi-arid world of Palestine and Israel, surrounded by stone and sand, fig trees and wheat fields.

This Bible study helps us to dive into the stories Jesus told about the natural world and to examine them through an ecological lens. With Jesus, trees, rocks and creatures as our teachers, we'll learn more about the places, geography and landscape of Jesus' life. In this way, we'll come to a deeper understanding of Jesus' and our own creatureliness, and of our mutual dependence on God's creation.

Theologian David Rhoads wrote in a book introducing ecojustice biblical criticism: "We are called to discern how the various gospels proclaimed by the early church can now address us in the circumstances in which we live, [and] can help us see what God is calling us to do in our time. The New Testament is a resource book for such a vocation, a collection of powerful testimonies to the work of God that authorize us to be creative and that empower us to address our problems in the Environmental Age with courage and with hope" (David M. Rhoads, "Who Will Speak for the Sparrow? Eco-Justice Criticism of the New Testament," *Literary Encounters with the Reign of God*, T&T Clark, 2004).

I am indebted to three wise biblical scholars and caring humans who opened my heart and eyes to this way of reading Scripture: David Rhoads, Barbara Rossing and Theodore Heibert. They taught me to take creation seriously in reading the

Bible and in living as a follower of Jesus. May this study invite you as well to not only read Scripture from a new perspective, but to encounter creation with a renewed commitment to care.

### USING YOUR TIME WELL

While I consider all the content in this Bible study to be worthwhile, many groups do not have time to do the complete study. So here are my suggestions for shortening the study.

#### SHORT STUDY (30 MINUTES)

1. Read or share the “Introduction.”
2. Read the John 15 passage.
3. Read and discuss: “A grapevine means home,” “Abiding in Jesus,” “Pruning,” “Y’all are branches!” (You may cut “Pruning,” if this is too much.)
4. Skip to the end, and do “Dream and scheme” (on p. 31) and “Closing prayer” (p. 24).

#### A LITTLE LONGER (45-60 MINUTES)

Do steps 1-4, as above, but with step 3, add “Two kinds of trees.”

#### EVEN LONGER: (60-90 MINUTES)

Do steps 1-4, as above, but with step 3, add “Abundant shrubs of goodness” and “Two kinds of trees.”

**Note:** The full Bible study, with enough time for good conversation, could take up to two hours. Some groups will do the full study, of course. But if your group opts to do a shortened version of this study, or if you are doing the study individually, I encourage you to read through it in a contemplative way. In other words, read all of the Scripture verses and respond to each question by writing in your journal or spending quiet moments in prayer.

#### SOME THOUGHTS FOR LEADERS

**Beginning:** Take some time at the beginning to help participants connect or reconnect with each other.

For introductions, ask each person to share their name, their favorite tree (if they have one) and why it is their favorite tree.

**Meet outdoors or where the outdoors is visible:** If the weather cooperates, consider gathering outside or near the company of some trees. One of the joys we discovered during the pandemic is that meeting outside can be quite a delight. We had wonderful gatherings on our front lawn when it was unsafe to be inside together. Maybe, if the weather is nice, you could gather with your circle under or near the shade of a tree. Wouldn't it be wonderful to talk about trees in the company of one? (If you decide to do this, ensure that the location is accessible to people who may have mobility issues.)

**Taking action:** (See “Dream and scheme” below.) This is an opportunity for you to take what you have talked about and let it move you to action. This may take some investigation on the part of the leader to have some ideas going in, or perhaps you can trust your people. I am regularly amazed at the connections, commitments and faithful actions that people are already doing—sometimes we just need to connect the dots between service and faith.

#### DREAM AND SCHEME

As this session ends, come up with a scheme or a way to act on the things you discussed and learned. What are some ways you can—as Dr. Seuss' Lorax said—“speak for the trees”? What can you do with others to protect, nurture or advocate for vines, trees and other plants? Remember: Local is always best. What is good in my part of eastern Iowa is not a plan for the Gulf Coast. If nothing else, make a plan to get to know those trees that surround you and give you breath.

Let this be energizing and motivating. It is easy to despair when it comes to caring for the planet, but this only paralyzes and immobilizes us. One powerful antidote to despair is action; even small action can inspire deeper hope. 🌿