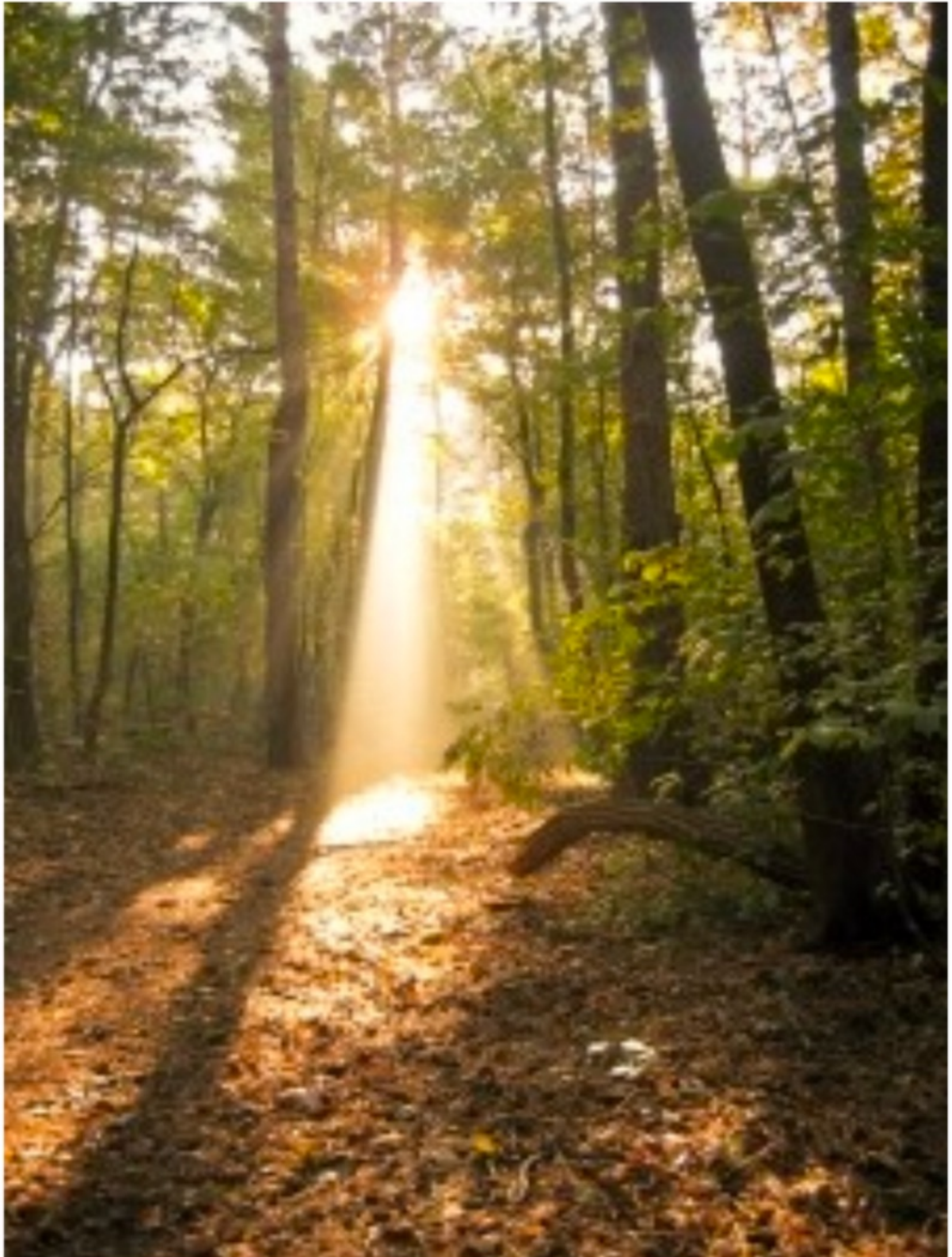


Meeting God in the Wilderness

A SPIRITUAL FORMATION TOOL

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Forward

What you are holding in your hand is an invitation. It's an invitation to slow down, unplug, and be attentive to creation, to God's voice, and to your own inner life.

Modern people have a tendency to live noisy, frenetic, distracted lives. The temptation to fill up the empty spaces in our day is powerful. It's far too easy to go days, weeks, or even months at a time without experiencing sustained solitude and silence. This is tragic, because solitude and silence are essential for our mental, emotional and spiritual health.

Ben understands this. He also understands that, inside the pages of Scripture, is a refreshing theme: namely, that God loves to meet with His People, and one of His favorite places to do so is in the wilderness!

The wilderness provides the perfect context for solitude and silence, attentiveness and mindfulness, soul-searching and listening for God's still, small voice. It is a place where we can face our life below the surface, and God's handiwork beyond the man-made environments in which we spend an increasingly large percentage of our lives.

Ben is an ecologist and a teacher—but first and foremost, he's a child of God. My life has been enriched as I've followed Ben's lead into the wilderness. He has taught me to see it as a place where God's glory is revealed, where I can receive the gifts of solitude, wonder, failure and suffering, where my heart can be laid bare and my mind and affections renewed.

Don't bother reading this in your study. Lace up your boots and hit the trail! Enjoy!

Bill Hodgeman, Sunderland, MA, October 1, 2019

Experience #1:

The Transformative Power of the Wilderness

BEFORE YOU HEAD OUT: Why go into the *wild*?

Throughout the Scriptures, God uses the *wilderness* as a way to commune with, discipline, and ultimately transform His people. Before engaging God in Creation, take some time to think about God's use of *wilderness* throughout history:

- The whole story of The Bible begins and ends in a Garden! God's ideal vision for the universe is a world where He, His people, and His creation co-exist peacefully and harmoniously (Genesis 1-2, Revelation 21)
- The initial peace between Humanity and Creation was thrown into disorder with The Fall (Genesis 3), making *wilderness* a frightening place full of unknown dangers, a place people came to describe as wild and waste.
- God used *wilderness* throughout the story of the Bible as a tool to discipline and transform His people. Think of the Israel's wanderings in the wilderness (see the Book of Numbers), or Israel's exile into the cultural 'wilds' of Babylon (see the Book of Daniel).
- God also meets with His people in the wilderness! God first made His Dwelling with Israel in the desert. He met with Moses in the desert (Exodus 3) and on Mt. Sinai (Exodus 19-20, 34). John the Baptist preached in the desert along the Jordan River (John 1:23), Jesus fasted for forty days in the wilderness (Luke 4:1-13) and Jesus was transfigured on a mountaintop (Luke 9:28-36).

Why is *wilderness* such an effective environment for us to engage with God?

- It allows us to simultaneously engage with the "two books" of God's revelation – scripture and creation (Psalm 19).
- It removes us from our daily concerns
- Since being in the wilderness is often difficult, discouraging, or downright frightening, it reminds us that we don't have the power to get through everything on our own.
- As we become attentive to our surroundings, and still, we become more able to hear and discern the voice of God.

AT THE TRAILHEAD:

“Therefore, behold, I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her.” (Hosea 2:14)

The Bible is filled with wilderness experiences; experiences that are orchestrated by God to confer identity, transform character and build faith.

Why do you think God does so much of His most important work in people’s lives in the context of the wilderness?

- What is it about the wilderness that makes it such a powerful arena for God to speak? Try to think of a time God spoke to you through wilderness.
- Consider meditating on Psalm 19 or I Kings 19:11-13 before you start out.

ON THE TRAIL:

It’s tempting to bring an agenda to the wilderness. Try to resist that. Instead, allow your senses to become engaged. Be observant, be aware, stop – look – listen. Try to intentionally engage with both of God’s Two Books by looking and listening for birds and bugs as much as for the voice of God.

- What draws your attention?
- How is the wilderness speaking?

God tells Israel through the prophet Hosea that He intends to lure her into the wilderness and speak tenderly to her there (Hosea 2:14).

- As you allow yourself to become more still and attentive, how might God be speaking to your heart?

A Word of Encouragement: If you are used to doing most of the talking when you pray, you might find this practice of being still and listening to be strange or difficult. If you find yourself becoming distracted: don’t be discouraged! Stop, take a deep breath, and ask God to help you be present and focused so that you can be attentive to His Creation and His voice.

BACK AT HOME:

Reflect:

- Did God speak to you or reveal anything to you while you were in the wilderness today? If so, how so?
- How might spending time with God in the wilderness more regularly impact your life, and especially your walk with Him and your relationships with others?
- Did God bring anything to the surface today that you have long been neglecting? An idol? A fear? An insecurity? A temptation? Why do you think God brought that thing to the surface? Do you sense God inviting you to rely more deeply on Him in some way?

Dig Deeper with some additional resources:

A Biblical Theology of Wilderness (tinyurl.com/y462j4mw)

The Garden and the Wilderness (tinyurl.com/yyx7abvt)

Pray:

Take time to thank God for the ways He revealed Himself and spoke to you today. Commit to carving out regular time with Him that is unhurried and undistracted in which you can be still and listen.

Plan:

Come up with a plan to meet with God in the wilderness again soon!

Experience #2:

The Gifts of the Wilderness

BEFORE YOU HEAD OUT: Receiving the Gifts of Solitude and Failure

As beautiful as it can be, the wilderness isn't all sunsets and butterflies. It is also storms, stings, and *suffering*. An odd conflict exists within us where we want to connect with and feel a part of nature while being uncomfortable and out of place within it. So, if wilderness can be lonely, frightening, or painful – why go? You should go into the wilderness because it is an ideal place to experience both solitude and failure. Throughout the Scriptures, God uses the solitude and disillusionment of *wilderness* as a way shape his followers.

Solitude is one of the supreme gifts of the wilderness. In his book Backpacking With the Saints, Belden Lane shares that solitude helps us:

- To separate from the crowds and chaos of everyday life
- To nurture our *true self* because we don't have to put on a show for others
- To access the mysteries hiding in our innermost being (soul searching!)
- To connect with creation

The difficulties and pain that we experience in the wilderness often lead to feelings of *disillusionment* and *failure*. As uncomfortable and painful as these can be, through them we:

- Recognize the grandeur of the universe and our place within it
- See our own limitations and our inability to succeed on our own.
- Learn to rely on God rather than ourselves.
- Have opportunities to receive *grace*.

The pages of the Bible are filled with examples of God using solitude, despair, and failure to shape his followers. For instance:

- *The Exodus Journey* from Egypt to the Promise Land taken by Israel is the ultimate example of trial in the wilderness. God miraculously saved Israel from slavery in Egypt only to have them wander alone and defeated for *forty* years! But, during this time God met with them face-to-face, gave them His Law, and made a covenant with them! Read more in the books of *Exodus* and *Numbers*
- Elijah was led into the wilderness by God where he lived alone. It was there that Elijah heard God's "gentle whisper." *1 Kings 19*
- David was chosen by God to lead Israel as king. Before he became King he was forced to live in the wilderness as he fled from king Saul. David went through his own personal exodus alone and frightened in the desert before becoming King of Israel. *1 Samuel*
- Jesus also was tested in the wild. Before He began His ministry Jesus was "led by the spirit" into the wilderness where he was tested by the Accuser. *Luke 4* and *Matthew 4*

AT THE TRAILHEAD:

"Remember how the LORD your God led you through the wilderness these forty years, to humble and to test you in order to know what was in your heart" (Deuteronomy 8:12)

Before going off on your own trek:

Think of the last time you were alone and quiet in solitude. Why is it sometimes difficult to be alone?

- There are many stories of *failure* in the Bible and many of them take place in the wilderness. What about failure opens us to the voice of the LORD?
- Meditate on Jesus' own testing in the wilderness (*Matthew 4* and *Luke 4*). Notice that Jesus was led into a time of solitude and suffering just after the spiritual high of Baptism and before starting his ministry. Why do you think this was important?

ON THE TRAIL:

In today's world even the most wild places can feel tame thanks the safety net of things like our cell phones. Consider leaving your phone behind, or turning off notifications, and even if you are out with others try to find time alone in *solitude* and quiet yourself.

Ask yourself:

- Have you ever been really been *alone* in the wilderness? Was it frightening?
- As you are alone in God's Creation, think about your life against the backdrop of the rest of creation. Consider the trees, which were here long before you were and will be here long after, or the amazing hidden beauty of nature that humans will never glimpse. What do you think is important in light of this?
- Think and pray over failures and difficult moments in your life. Ask God how He can help you navigate through these moments. How can our wilderness experiences (including physical failures and solitude) help us navigate life's tough times?

ENCOURAGEMENT: If you find your mind filling up with distracting thoughts, stop, take a deep breath, and ask God to help you to be present and undistracted so that you can be attentive to His Creation and attentive to His voice.

BACK AT HOME:

- Did God speak to you or reveal anything to you while you were in the wilderness today? If so, how so?
- In *Matthew 14* Peter gets out of the boat and briefly walks on water with Jesus. He quickly succumbs to fear and begins to sink. But, Peter *got out of the boat!* How can you "get out of the boat" more often? If today's walk was easy, consider going for a tougher trail next time!
- What fears or worries arose while you were alone in the wild? What does this say about what you value most in your life?

Pray:

Take time to thank God for the ways He revealed Himself and spoke to you today. Commit to carving out regular time with Him that is unhurried and undistracted in which you can be still and listen.

Plan:

Come up with a plan to meet with God in the wilderness again soon!

Experience #3:

Returning Home with the Gifts of the Wild

BEFORE YOU HEAD OUT: Noticing & Discerning

The beauty and wonder of wilderness has captured the imagination of people all over the world for millennia. Scientists, artists, poets, and philosophers have all been inspired by the intricate beauty of nature. The *complexity* and *beauty* coupled with the solitude and difficulties experienced in the wilderness offer us the opportunity to enter into mindful attentiveness to see God in Creation and to *discern His will* for our lives.

Many people long to be able to *discern God's will and direction* for their lives. This involves moving beyond the superficial in our relationship with God to discover the authentic. The physical rhythm of walking allows our senses, minds and spirits the freedom to focus their attention on noticing God and communicating authentically with Him! As modern wanderer John Muir said – “Into the forest I go, to lose my mind and find my soul.” Throughout the Bible many characters retreated to the wilderness to escape distractions and *discern* the will of God.

- Jacob was journeying through the wilderness when he wrestled with God and received his new name, Israel. (*Genesis 32*)
- Elijah was led into the wilderness by God where he lived alone. It was while in the wilderness that Elijah felt God in a “gentle whisper” of wind. (*1 Kings 19*)
- According to Luke, Jesus “often withdrew to wilderness to pray.” (*5:16*)

Rhythms of the trail, freedom from distraction, solitude, and difficulty all help us to become more *mindful* of our surroundings and encourage us to delight in the wonders of God's Creation. The Scriptures call us to attend to the grandeur, beauty, and complexity of Creation. Indeed, they call us to notice God in *all* things! For example:

- Numerous Psalms extol the glory of creation, *ie: 19, 33, 104, 148*
- Near the end of the book of Job, God speaks to Job of the beauty and power of Creation – *Job 38-41*

Christians often assume that the spiritual and the physical are two separate realms. But the Biblical doctrines of Creation and Incarnation forever intertwine the physical and spiritual and lead to a *vigorous* celebration of the natural world!

AT THE TRAILHEAD:

“But ask the animals, and they will teach you, or the birds in the sky, and they will tell you; or speak to the earth and it will teach you, or let the fish in the sea inform you. Which of these does not know that the hand of the LORD has done this? In his hand is the life of every creature and the breath of mankind.” (Job 12:7-10)

Read the passage above a few times. How have you let nature teach you?

Mindfulness involves an intentional acceptance of each passing moment without judgement. It is accepting and meditating on your current situation without immediately identifying it as good or bad. Begin by releasing everything that has happened so far today, clear your mind of the concerns of the day to start a fresh conversation with God.

In today’s world, even the most wild places can feel tame thanks to the safety net and security of our cell phones. Consider leaving your phone behind, or turning off your notifications.

NOTE: In Genesis 2 God invited Adam to name the animals in the Garden. Something as simple as knowing the name of an animal or plant goes a long way toward learning about and loving God’s creation. Consider investing in a local nature guide so you can learn to identify more of the wildlife and plant life where you live.

ON THE TRAIL:

As you hike along the trail, accept each thought, feeling, and event as it comes. For example, if a mosquito bites you, try not to get upset. Rather, accept it, recognize it as uncomfortable, and then shoo your blood sucking friend away!

Take time to sit in the wonder of creation. Try to see the intricacies and beauty of nature in a new way. For instance:

- Find a bench, log, or rock and sit quietly and observe! What do you see? What do you hear?
- Look closely at the bark of a tree, the leaves of a plant, or the edge of a pond. Look for the small things you usually miss like insects or fungi.
- Think and pray over failures and difficult moments in your life. Ask God how He can help you navigate through these moments. What about the physical failure and difficulty of solitude in the wilderness can help us navigate life’s tough times?

BACK AT HOME:

In the wilderness we can simultaneously engage with the Two Books of God's Revelation—Creation and Scripture (Psalm 19). We can experience the powerful forces of solitude and the difficulties of the trail that help us to rely fully on God. And, we can enter a state of mindful discernment in order to better listen to God as we bathe in the beauty of Creation!

When we ultimately turn our gaze homeward, we anticipate the gift of *Community*. Our solitude and mindful reflection help remind us that we are *not* the center of the universe. Being attentive to, and aware of, the diversity of nature reveals that Creation *itself* is a community – and that everything is part of a larger whole! The solitude of the wild also reminds us that we *need* community with God and others to sustain our selves!

- Thomas Berry wrote: “The natural world is the larger sacred community to which we belong. To be alienated from this community is to become destitute in all that makes us human.”
- Periods of retreat, rejuvenation, and prayer (discernment) in the wilderness clue us into the *needs* of our community. Jesus repeatedly went to wilderness to pray, refresh and hear God speak, and then *immediately* went into towns and cities to *serve the people*! A wonderful example of this is Jesus' Baptism, Temptation and Ministry (*Matthew 3:13-4:25*).
- If you were able to discern God's voice today, don't let the moment pass! Write down what you heard and spend time meditating on it and responding to God in prayer.
- Continue to visit and reflect on your experiences of *wilderness* throughout your life. How might these journeys become part of your spiritual transformation? How might they serve to deepen your relationship with God?

KEEP GOING!

We hope you've enjoyed this journey!

More importantly, we hope that this resource has helped you to develop an appetite for meeting God in the wilderness. We would be overjoyed if you decided to make journeying into the wilderness a regular part of your life and walk with God!

For those of you who live in or around the Pioneer Valley of Western Massachusetts, below is a list of recommended nature sanctuaries and flat-ground trails where you can continue your journey.

No matter where you live, we encourage you to find quiet, wild places where you can go to meet with God.

Fort River Trail

63 Moody Bridge Rd.

Hadley, MA

260 acres of forests, riverlands, and grasslands with a 1.2 mile loop that is fully handicap accessible. Features pollinator garden, and resources for children. Free to the public.

Arcadia Wildlife Sanctuary

127 Combs Rd.

Easthampton, MA

Arcadia's diverse terrain of forest, meadows, grasslands, marsh, and wetlands attracts an extraordinary variety of wildlife. Open Dawn til dusk.

Terrace Trails (located behind College Church,)

48 Pomeroy Terrace

Northampton, MA

Two loops of woodland trails; partly wheelchair and stroller accessible. Open year round.

Mount Warner Reservation

26 Mount Warner Road

Hadely, MA

2.2 mile loop of old cart paths and woodland roads on 500 acres dotted with vernal pools and seasonal wetlands.

Robert Frost Trail

Various trail heads throughout Amherst and nearby communities loop into 47 miles of historic hiking paths; includes Mount Toby (Sunderland) and the Mill River Reservation (North Amherst).