

PART ONE - SESSION THREE

A Vision for Right Relationship with the Land & Covenant with the Creator

The Rev. Rachel Taber-Hamilton

At the conclusion of this session, participants will:

- Have an understanding of how and why land-based environmental issues are intertwined with Indigenous identity, culture, and spirituality.
- Have greater knowledge of the historical experience of Indigenous people that informs Indigenous perspectives of environmental issues that affect them today and how the daily practice of creation care is interwoven with Indigenous stewardship rights of sovereignty.
- Have greater awareness regarding how their own personal stories and life experiences shape their relationships with the place/space where they live and the consequence of dislocation from the land due to the colonial and modern history of immigration.
- Have learned about how the Western cosmology that shaped Christianity informs the American corporate identification of land as a resource that can be owned, commercialized, and exploited—with non-human entities characterized as being without soul and devoid of Spirit/sacredness.
- Why reclaiming the sacred nature of creation is vital in the work of creation care and environmental advocacy.

Please review the primary resources, guiding Scripture, and reflection and discussion questions prior to the small group gathering. Optional resources are available for a deeper dive.

PRE-GATHERING PREPARATION

Find these resources online at <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/ministries/creation-care/love-god-love-gods-world-curriculum/session-three/>.

Primary Resources:

- Film: “Inhabitants: Indigenous Perspectives on Restoring our World” (1hr 16min).
- Reading: Chapter 4 | “Smohalla: If the Land has Anything to Say” from “We Survived the End of the World: Lessons from Native America on Apocalypse and Hope” by Steven Charleston, published by Broadleaf Books (2023).

Optional Resources:

- Film: “Indigenous Land Stewardship: Tending Nature” (57 min)

GUIDING SCRIPTURE

Psalm 104:10-26 (NRSV)

You make springs gush forth in the valleys;
they flow between the hills,
giving drink to every wild animal;
the wild asses quench their thirst.
By the streams the birds of the air have their habitation;
they sing among the branches.

From your lofty abode you water the mountains;
the earth is satisfied with the fruit of your work.

You cause the grass to grow for the cattle,
and plants for people to use,
to bring forth food from the earth,
and wine to gladden the human heart,
oil to make the face shine,
and bread to strengthen the human heart.
The trees of the Lord are watered abundantly,
the cedars of Lebanon that he planted.
In them the birds build their nests;
the stork has its home in the fir trees.
The high mountains are for the wild goats;
the rocks are a refuge for the coney.
You have made the moon to mark the seasons;
the sun knows its time for setting.
You make darkness, and it is night,
when all the animals of the forest come creeping out.
The young lions roar for their prey,
seeking their food from God.
When the sun rises, they withdraw
and lie down in their dens.
People go out to their work
and to their labor until the evening.

O Lord, how manifold are your works!
In wisdom you have made them all;
the earth is full of your creatures.
Yonder is the sea, great and wide,
creeping things innumerable are there,
living things both small and great.
There go the ships,
and Leviathan that you formed to sport in it.

SMALL GROUP GATHERING

Facilitator or volunteer can use the prayer below to open your time together.

OPENING PRAYER

By the Rev. Rachel Taber-Hamilton

Gracious Creator,
You have made us in your image,
With the same fierce forces that formed the universe.
Help us to appreciate that each of us are expressions
Of the diversity that you encompass and name as good.
Guide us as we follow your Son

On the Sacred Journey of becoming fully human,
The One who was with you from before time and through whom
All things are made.
Through Christ we are united with our ancestors—
The stars, winds, and waters, the sun and moon—
And with All Our Relations on Earth.
Give us the grace to live in humility and balance
With the animals and plants in the environments
Wherever you have placed us, the peoples of the world,
So that we might be the nurturers and cultivators
That you need us to be.
May we be Good Gardeners of healing and resurrection
As we dwell in reciprocity with the Earth that you have made.
Amen.

CHECK-IN

Facilitator leads the group through brief check-ins from each participant.

REFLECTION

Group can choose to read the reflection out loud together or go directly to discussion questions depending on timing and how many participants were able to do the reading prior to the gathering.

The creation story of my Indigenous tradition tells of how Grandfather Spirit was journeying in the midst of the stars when he heard the distant sound of a woman weeping. He walked far throughout the cosmos until he found Grandmother Spirit crying by herself in the great stillness. When Grandfather asked why Grandmother was crying, she told him that she was lonely and longed for the company of those whom she could nurture. She told him that her purpose was not fulfilled. So, Grandfather molded Grandmother Spirit into what we now inhabit as the Earth, so that she would never be lonely but have diverse life in abundance to nurture and to sustain.

Sacred stories of the Earth teach us how to live with the land as a divine covenant of ethical relationship. The sacred stories of Indigenous people are tens of thousands of years old and are intimately linked with Indigenous understandings of the local environment. Sacred stories teach how to identify and harvest medicines and their use, the habits and life cycles of the animals upon which they rely for subsistence, and the seasonal cycles of the year, including movements of the sun and moon. The spirituality and identity of Indigenous people root communities in a specific place. Each community's relationship to the environment is expressed in lifeways and technologies that are passed from generation to generation as spiritual imperatives. The ethical imperatives of how we are to live with All Our Relations (animals, plants, terrain, stars, water) are held with equal regard as our relationships with other people, with our ancestors, and with the Sacred.

When I have led retreats and workshops on creation spirituality and colonialism, there seems to me to be a common stumbling block for those whose ancestry in the Americas goes back only 400 years or less (almost 98% of the U.S. population). If it takes thousands of years to form an intergenerational relationship with sacred nature and spiritual wisdom of place, then the vast majority of non-Native Americans will likely have difficulty conceiving and living into a spiritual covenant with the land they occupy as settlers. Added to this reality is the phenomenon of urban development in post-World War II

America, the nomadic lives of those who move for education and employment, and patterns of moving from self-supporting rural agricultural areas to commerce-dependent urban areas. All of these may be contributing factors to further spiritual separation from the land. Indigenous people have also experienced separation from heritage lands, with nearly seven out of 10 Native Americans living in urban areas today.

At the same time, across the global landscape, Indigenous people comprise 5% of the world population but protect 81% of its biodiversity. In every nation and on every continent, Indigenous people are leaders in environmental stewardship and environmental justice advocacy. From Water Protectors to Guardians of the Rainforest, from the Indigenous communities defending the Arctic National Wildlife Reserve to the Maori people's influence on the decision of the New Zealand parliament to grant personhood status to the Whanganui River—Indigenous people are on the frontline of preserving environmental resources from degradation, depletion, and extinction. They do so at great personal risk and cost. For example, between 2016 and 2021, 58 Indigenous leaders were murdered in the Amazonian rainforest regions of Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru. The Indigenous people being killed are those who protect the water, life, and trees of the rainforest. Indigenous environmental protectors in the Amazonian rainforest regions are regularly threatened by the state, paramilitary organizations, extractive industries, and by organized crime.

Any ally dedicated to environmental advocacy and resolving the climate crisis needs to attend to the knowledge and experience of Indigenous communities locally and globally. Supporting Indigenous environmental concerns must include supporting the efforts of Indigenous communities to recover traditional lifeways, food ways, language, and land practices. These actions of cultural recovery empower Indigenous people to live into their unique divine covenant with creation, which is understood to be the manifestation of the Sacred. Loving our neighbors as ourselves means recognizing that all beings on Earth—and the cosmos itself—are our kin, All Our Relations. Within Christian faith, we are called to incarnate in action our love for Creator and creation in ways that reflect the stories of our Christian faith. We are called to be good stewards, emulating the healing ministry of Christ and the labor of resurrection. Our relationship with creation is the only place we have in this life to enact our love of God, our thankfulness for all that sustains us, and cultivate the relationships that weave all that is into a single sacred braid.

Discussion Questions

Facilitator guides the group through the discussion questions.

1. The movie “Inhabitants” follows five Native American tribes as they restore their traditional land management practices that were disrupted by colonialism. How would you describe your relationship to the land where you live and the challenges you experience in having a sacred relationship with the Earth?
2. As you reflect on Psalm 104, what would you include in celebrating God’s creation that is unique to where you live?
3. What aspects of your life and the environment in which you live need cultivation, nurture, restoration?
4. In Chapter 4 of “We Survived the End of the World,” Steven Charleston shares the story of Indigenous visionary and spiritual leader Smohalla. In Smohalla’s revelation, he gave his people the message that the White settlers would bring about an apocalypse to the Indigenous people and that Indigenous people should reject the colonizer's ways of life and return to their Indigenous lifeways. What vision informs either your pessimism or hope for the future of the Earth?
5. What lifeways and spiritual practices do you live by that connect you to creation and reflect your care/stewardship of creation?

CLOSING CHECK-OUT & PRAYER

What word describes how you feel right now? After you've shared, please invite another person to go.

After all have offered a word, the facilitator or volunteer can pray a simple prayer bringing together the hopes and prayers of the whole group.

ACTION OPPORTUNITIES

These are activities and engagement opportunities to explore different ways to get involved and learn more. For additional resources, see addendum.

- **'Amazonia Viva'** - a virtual reality film [9 min], supported by the Interfaith Rainforest Initiative; to schedule the film for your diocese or group, contact contato.amazoniavr@gmail.com or mayaralima.tribrasil@gmail.com. For more information about the experience, visit <https://amazoniavr.com.br/en/>
- I am often asked how to help and support Indigenous concerns on environmental issues. Becoming informed and helpful allies to Indigenous communities requires a long-term and intergenerational commitment to relationships and partnerships with Indigenous communities in ways that ask allies to follow Indigenous leadership on tackling Indigenous social and environmental justice concerns. To learn more about meaningful ways to be an ally to Indigenous peoples, I recommend that you review this resource developed by Greenpeace: <https://www.greenpeace.org/usa/10-ways-to-be-ally-indigenous-peoples/>
- Check out the Indigenous Environmental Network, where you can find many more resources and connections. [<https://sacredland.org/indigenous-environmental-network/>]
- Read the United Nations Statement on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. It is a foundational document on the importance of Indigenous sovereignty. The document provides an operative definition of Indigenous people and is a valuable resource for anyone seeking a meaningful relationship with Indigenous communities locally and globally: https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/wp-content/uploads/sites/19/2018/11/UNDRIP_E_web.pdf

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

The Rev. Rachel Taber-Hamilton is an Indigenous ordained priest in The Episcopal Church. As a Shackan First Nation person, she represents The Episcopal Church on the board of the Anglican Indigenous Network and was part of the project team for the network's video series, "Prophetic Indigenous Voices on the Planetary Crisis." She served on The Episcopal Church delegation to the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues and on Episcopal Church Presiding Bishop Michael Curry's delegation to United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP26). She has written articles addressing Indigenous concerns for Anglican Theological Review, including "The Necessity of Native American Autonomy for Successful Partnerships" and "When Creation is Sacred." Taber-Hamilton is the rector of Trinity Episcopal Church in Everett, Washington, and serves as vice president of the House of Deputies of The Episcopal Church.

