

Worship Resources for Trees of Life: Hope for God's Earth

The first and last chapters of the Bible feature the “tree of life” as a critical part in the community of creation. While the Christian calendar does not have a special day to celebrate trees, the Jewish calendar does on Tu BiShvat or Tu B'Shevat, a holiday for ecological awareness and planting trees. Canada has Arbor Week the last Friday in April to the first Sunday in May and the United States has Arbor Day on the last Friday in April each year.

This time in spring is a good opportunity to celebrate and plant trees for creation care and climate action. Trees are the best, most cost-efficient natural climate solution. Trees not only sequester carbon, cool the planet, and slow climate change, but support biodiversity and provide an array of amazing other benefits.

This packet provides worship resources for congregations who wish to focus on trees of life in the ecology of God's creation.



Berkey Avenue Mennonite Fellowship (Goshen, IN) planting over 700 trees in April, 2022

Suggested scriptures

Genesis 2:4b-9, 15. If the congregation prefers an inclusive version, consider this selection from *The Inclusive Bible*:

At the time when YHWH made the heavens and the Earth, there was still no wild bush on the Earth nor had any wild plant sprung up, for YHWH had not yet sent rain to the Earth, and there was no human being to till the soil. Instead, a flow of water would well up from the ground and irrigate the soil. So YHWH fashioned an earth creature out of the clay of the earth, and blew into its nostrils the breath of life. And the earth creature became a living being.

YHWH planted a garden to the east, in Eden, and placed in it the earth creature that had been made. Then YHWH caused every kind of tree that is pleasant to the sight and good to eat to spring from the soil. In the center of the garden was the Tree of Life, and the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. . .

Then YHWH took the earth creature and settled it in the garden of Eden so that it might cultivate and care for the land.

Additional scriptures if desired: Luke 21:29-32; Revelation 22:1-5

Sermon focus

Trees are critical in the ecosystems of God's creation. In the beginning, God created trees for the Earth (Genesis 1:11-12) and placed the “tree of life” in the garden (Genesis 2:8-15). This woodland garden represents what God intended: beauty, biodiversity, and abundance where trees give life for all on Earth. In the last chapter of the Bible, we see the “tree of life” again producing fruit and leaves for healing the world (Revelation 22:1-2). The vision is of a healthy, vibrant planet where God's abundant life of shalom is enjoyed by all from generation to generation. Trees play an essential role in this vision. Trees provide essential ecosystem services and valuable benefits for our communities. (See Jessica B. Turner–Skoff and Nicole Cavender, “The benefits of trees for livable and sustainable communities” in *Plants, People, Planet*. 2019; 1:323–335.) As stewards of creation, God calls us to serve and protect the Earth (Genesis 2:15).

Children's story

Wangari's Trees of Peace by Jeanette Winter; *Seeds of Change* (story of Wangari Maathai); *The Tree Lady* (story of Katherine Olivia Sessions and her planting of San Diego); *Thank You, Trees!* by Gail Langer Karwoski.

Litanies

Note: VT = *Voices Together*; HWB = *Hymnal Worship Book*; SS = *Sing the Story*

Gathering together: VT 855 or 864

Congregational Response:

L: For the glory of trees in your creation and their place on the Earth,

P: *We praise you, God.*

L: For the gifts of trees with all that they contribute to our life,

P: *We thank you, God.*

L: As trees are rooted in the earth, reach for your light, and bear abundant fruit,

P: *So may we be in our life with you, God.*

L: That we as stewards may care for trees and all of your creation,

P: *Fill us with your Spirit, God*

Hymns

Praise the Lord, Sing Hallelujah (HWB, 50)

For The Beauty of The Earth (HWB, 89)

I Saw a Tree by The Riverside (SS 116)

Touch the Earth Lightly (VT 145)

At the Dawn of Your Creation (VT 179)

This is God's Wonderous World (VT 180)

Creation is a Song (VT 181)

Light Dawns on a Weary World (VT 205)

We Dream of a Turning (VT 209)

O Blessed Spring (VT 522)

The Garden Needs our Tending Now (VT 788)

Be a Sower (VT 789)

There's a Wild Hope (VT 828)

You Shall Go Out with Joy (VT 847)

Bulletin cover

Tree of Life on page 12 in *Voices Together*. The artist of this piece, SaeJin Lee, offers this [original color version of the Tree of Life](#) painting for use in worship free of charge if the following guidelines are honored:

- Limit use of *Tree of Life* for bulletin cover and/or projection.
- Please do NOT photocopy or save the digital file for personal use.
- If interested in getting a printed copy for personal keeping, contact SaeJin to purchase this at saejin1210@gmail.com.
- For use in other settings, contact SaeJin at the email above.
- Please credit the painting as: Lee, SaeJin. *Tree of Life*. 2018. Watercolor paint and colored pencils.

You are welcome to use the artist statement along with the image: "We gather at the *Tree of Life*, which was in the garden, and will be with us in the restored creation. Around the tree we rest and play; under its branches we belong. It is our source of wisdom, and its leaves are for the healing of the nations. By the tree we need not fear, for the lamb rests in the bosom of the lion, and the child and the adder play together. By the tree we meet our friends—old and new, forgotten and familiar. And when we have gathered, we realize the tree has been with us all along. So come, friends, rest, play, and belong."



Guest speaker to consider

Steve Thomas, MDiv, is available to preach/teach on trees of life in the Bible and for the Earth. This may be in person or virtually. Steve has served as a pastor for 33 years and directs Mennonite Men, the

men's organization of Mennonite Church USA, and coordinates the JoinTrees campaign to plant one million trees to help restore the Earth. He is a certified arborist with the International Society of Arboriculture and has a graduate certificate in urban forestry from Oregon State University. Contact him in Goshen, Indiana at SteveT@Mennonites.org or 574-202-0048.

Second hour discussion

If your congregation has a second hour for education or discussion, you may want to consider the attached stories from *Anabaptist World* for conversation. *My Prayer: God Save the Earth* focuses on the critical role trees play in the community of God's creation. *A Forest of Faith: Planting an Acre of Trees, Indiana Congregation Adds a Second Sanctuary* tells the story of a Mennonite congregation planting over 700 trees on land next to their building.

Discussion questions:

- What do you most appreciate about trees and forests?
- What special memory do you have with a tree or forest in your life?
- How does the fact that the first and last chapters of the Bible feature trees of life suggest to you?
- How do trees provide "life" in the community of God's creation?
- What in these articles was new or stood out to you?
- Why, according to these articles, are trees so critical for the Earth?
- Of the various ecosystem services and community benefits of trees, what do you especially value?
- Where have you planted trees and what has planting and caring for trees been like for you?
- How might we—our households or congregation—participate in or support the Mennonite JoinTrees campaign to plant a million trees to help restore God's Earth?

If your congregation engages Steve Thomas to preach (in person or virtually), he is also available to discuss questions people may have or to consider how your church may plant trees on your property with the JoinTrees campaign to plant a million trees to help restore the Earth. See information on JoinTrees [here](#).



Planting project with 640 trees at Landisville Mennonite Church (Landisville, PA) in 2021.