

SEE JOY IN GOD'S CREATION

PSALM 65:5–13;
GENESIS 28:11–22

In the spring of 2021, as more and more people received vaccinations against the coronavirus, some congregations began attempting to worship safely in person. Like many other worshipping communities, it had been over a year since First Presbyterian Church of Valparaiso, Indiana, had gathered in person for worship, and the people sorely missed being physically together. Plans to gather safely were laid out. The elders of the church voted to worship outside and in person on Easter Sunday, with restrictions on singing and corporate prayer. Easter Sunday finally arrived. It was a beautiful morning. A cellist and guitarist played the song made famous by Louis Armstrong many years ago, “What a Wonderful World.” As they played, songbirds were singing loudly, geese were honking as they flew overhead, babies were babbling, and one worshiper’s dog barked her own hymn of praise. In that very moment, the congregation was reminded of God’s presence in this wonderful world through music, nature, babies, and animals. All creation sang. God’s glory is all around us; the practice of joy invites us to notice it and savor it.

It is often not a lack of faith but mere inattention that impedes our practice of joy. Even in the best of times, a thousand ordinary things can distract us from the joy we find in God’s presence. Other times, we get caught up in the immediate tasks of our days, whether ordinary routines or unusual challenges. Still, it is important to set aside time to be, to pause, to reflect on past experiences, and to savor God’s presence in order to practice joy more fully. This helps us to recognize God’s presence in ways that might not have been evident before.

Scripture tells us that God’s presence has been and will continue to be with us always. In the story of creation, God’s Spirit blew over the water; when the ancient Israelites wandered in the wilderness after the exodus, God provided manna; God dwelled among us when God became flesh in the person of Jesus Christ, Emmanuel—meaning God with us; the promise of the coming of the Holy Spirit, following Christ’s ascension, is fulfilled. When we consider God’s faithful presence, we cannot help but respond with joy.

INTRODUCING THE PRACTICE

One way we express joy is in music. This well-beloved hymn connects God with the glories of nature.

Joyful, Joyful, we adore thee, God of glory, Lord of Love!
Hearts unfold like flowers before thee, opening to the sun above.
Melt the clouds of sin and sadness; drive the dark of doubt away.
Giver of immortal gladness, fill us with the light of day.¹

Where do you
see joy in God's
creation?



While imprisoned because of his faith with no expectation to be set free, Paul still urged the Christian community in Philippi to “stand firm in the Lord” (Philippians 4:1). As you read verses 4–6, consider how joy might be felt even in difficult times.

1. Henry van Dyke, “Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee,” in *Glory to God* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2013), #611.

Rejoice in the Lord always;
again I will say, Rejoice. Let your
gentleness be known to everyone.
The Lord is near. Do not worry about
anything, but in everything by prayer and
supplication with thanksgiving let your
requests be made known to God.

—Philippians 4:4–6

Session ONE—See Joy in God's Creation

FINDING THE PRACTICE IN THE BIBLE

RESPONDING TO GOD'S PRESENCE WITH JOY

The practice of joy is a faithful response. Psalm 65 invites us to notice and delight in the abundant beauty of God's presence in nature and join in nature's song of praise. To enter into this joy begins with noticing creation's beauty in countless ways. Wherever we are—to the earth's farthest bound—creation summons our attention. We are urged to lift our eyes: to the gateways of morning sunrise and evening sunset, the roar of the waves and the strength of the mountains, the flow of the rivers and breadth of the plains, the abundant yield of watered grains, the pastures of the wilderness and hills girded with joy. To notice the particular beauty of nature around us is an entrance into its joy—its joy that reflects the presence of our Creator, the hand behind the beauty.

By awesome deeds you answer us with deliverance,

O God of our salvation;
you are the hope of all the ends of the earth
and of the farthest seas.

By your strength you established the mountains;
you are girded with might.

You silence the roaring of the seas,
the roaring of their waves,
the tumult of the peoples.

Those who live at earth's farthest bounds are awed by your signs;
you make the gateways of the morning and the evening shout for joy.

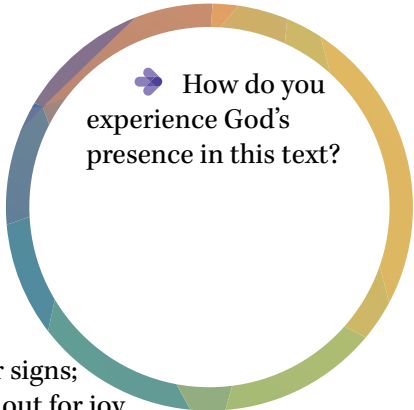
You visit the earth and water it,
you greatly enrich it;
the river of God is full of water;
you provide the people with grain,
for so you have prepared it.

You water its furrows abundantly,
settling its ridges,
softening it with showers,
and blessing its growth.


You crown the year with your bounty;
your wagon tracks overflow with richness.

The pastures of the wilderness overflow,
the hills gird themselves with joy,
the meadows clothe themselves with flocks,
the valleys deck themselves with grain,
they shout and sing together for joy.

—Psalm 65:5–13



➔ How do you
experience God's
presence in this text?



➔ Where do you see
the connection between
God's presence and our joy?

JACOB'S DREAM

In Genesis 28:11–22, after Jacob receives his father's blessing, he is sent to his Uncle Laban's house. On his way, he rests for the night and feels God very near him. As we read this passage, it invites us to contemplate the unexpected places and times when we have felt God near to us. Even more, it encourages us to consider how being open to God's presence not only brings momentary joy and awe but transforms our lives.

Take a moment to read Genesis 28:11–22.

- How do you experience God's presence in this text?
- Where do you see the connection between God's presence and joy?

The collection of the Psalms is poetically written, but they are more than poetry. The Psalms were written to be chanted or sung, much like we use the modern-day hymnbook. The types of psalms range from songs of praise, hymns, lament, imprecatory (calling upon God's judgment for one's enemies), wisdom, royal, prophetic, confidence, remembrance, and thanksgiving.

Delighting in God's presence is not limited to being out in nature or our dreams. The Scriptures tell stories of God's people throughout the generations who rejoice in God's presence in all kinds of circumstances. What other stories have you learned that speak to savoring God's presence?

Biblical scholars agree that the Hebrew Bible, what many Christians refer to as the Old Testament, was originally an oral tradition. This means the stories were shared verbally, much like storytelling, from generation to generation, many years before they were written down. As you reflect on Genesis 28:11–22, how might you tell the story if you did not have the words in front of you to read?

Jacob woke from his sleep and said, "Surely the LORD is in this place—and I did not know it!" And he was afraid, and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven."
—Genesis 28:16–17



FINDING THE PRACTICE THEN AND NOW

Our senses are awakened when we are intentional in savoring the joy of creation. Through God's gift of our senses—touch and smell, movement and stillness, even our breath itself—we can discover the presence of God in our midst. There are places we can experience God's presence, including when we gather for Christian worship. Worship is an intentional act of faith. Through words, action, music, silence, art, the gifts of Word and sacrament, we give all glory and honor, praise and thanksgiving “to glorify God who is present and active among us.”² Of course, language changes, as do themes and understanding; even specific words get a refresh from time to time. Following are some ways Christians have found to rejoice in God's presence.

HYMNS, SONGS, AND SPIRITUAL SONGS

As previously mentioned, the psalms were meant to be sung, and many of them rejoice in God's presence in creation. Most church hymnals and songbooks are also filled with songs celebrating creation.

In the spring of 1863, Folliott S. Pierpoint was on a hill, looking out over his home town of Bath, England, and the winding Avon River. He was inspired to write a song about God's gifts of creation. The hymn, “For the Beauty of the Earth,” is in most hymnals. As you read the verses, can you imagine feeling awe at creation and writing such a text?

For the beauty of the earth,
for the glory of the skies,
for the love which from our birth
over and around us lies:

Refrain:

Lord of all, to thee we raise
this our hymn of grateful praise.

For the wonder of each hour
of the day and of the night,
hill and vale, and tree and flower,
sun and moon, and stars of light:
(Refrain)

For the joy of ear and eye,
for the heart and mind's delight,
for the mystic harmony
linking sense to sound and sight:
(Refrain)

For the joy of human love,
brother, sister, parent, child,
friends on earth, and friends above,
for all gentle thoughts and mild:
(Refrain)

For thyself, best gift divine
to the world so freely given;
for that great, great love of thine,
peace on earth and joy in heaven:
(Refrain)³

2. “The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.),” Part II, *Book of Order* (Louisville, KY: Office of the General Assembly, 2019), W-1.0101.

3. Folliott Sandford Pierpoint, “For the Beauty of the Earth,” in *Glory to God* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2013), #14.

ST. FRANCIS AND THE BLESSING OF THE ANIMALS

St. Francis was born into a wealthy family in Assisi, Italy, in the twelfth century. Through a spiritual encounter on a trip to Rome, he was converted to give his life to those who were poor, to give up all his wealth and become one of them. He loved all creatures and is said to have preached to even the birds. The religious order he founded—the Franciscans—is committed to live a life of poverty, simplicity of life, and care for the poor. Many churches have a special worship celebration of animals where the community can bring their animals to be blessed as a recognition that God loves all creatures. The Cathedral of Saint John the Divine in New York City has a yearly Blessing of the Animals, which is quite spectacular. Watch the YouTube video “Annual Blessing of the Animals Held at Cathedral of Saint John the Divine” (bit.ly/FMBlessingAnimals, 2:00).

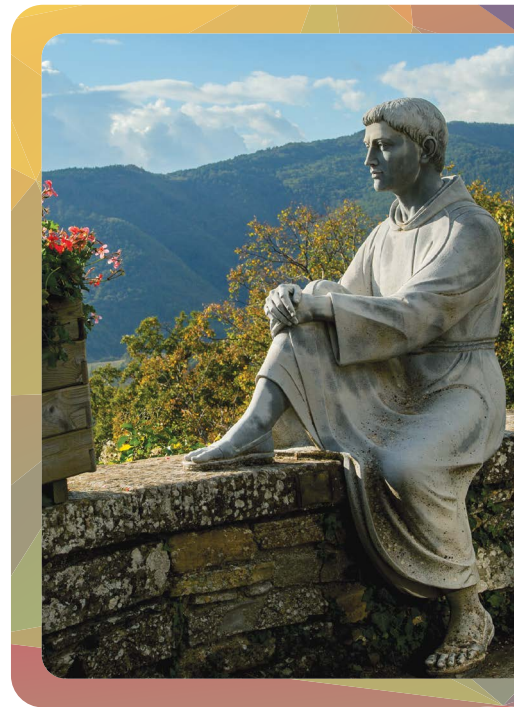
ENVIRONMENTAL STEWARDSHIP

Many church ministries are committed to environmental stewardship. This means they are passionate about caring for creation. To rejoice in God’s presence in creation, we must care for it. The late theologian Karl Barth once said, “Joy is the simplest form of gratitude.”⁴

When we care for creation, we are expressing gratitude—our joy—as we honor the work and presence of God in our midst.

Creation care can be worked on individually and collectively: pledging not to use single-use plastics, including grocery bags; installing solar panels; adopting a highway/stretch of road to care for; even planting a community garden. There are numerous ways to show our joy, our gratitude in caring for the world.

- GreenFaith is an interfaith global network that seeks to connect people who are committed to protecting the planet and caring for the world. Visit bit.ly/FMGreenFaith to learn about “Sacred People, Sacred Earth, Day of Climate Action” and “GreenFaith Circles.”
 - Interfaith Power and Light is a network of religious communities working together to take bold and just action to fight climate change. Learn more at [bit.ly /FMPowerAndLight](https://bit.ly/FMPowerAndLight).
 - Many denominations also have national offices responding to climate change. See your denominational website to find out ways to get involved.
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- In what ways do you participate in creation care?
 - How might you invite family members, friends, or your congregation to engage in environmental stewardship?



4. Joseph Hartrop, “‘Joy is the Simplest Form of Gratitude’: 12 Quotes from Legendary Theologian Karl Barth,” *Christian Today* (May 10, 2017), www.christiantoday.com/article/joy.is.the.simplest.form.of.gratitude.12.quotes.from.legendary.theologian.karl.barth/108806.htm, accessed January 30, 2021.

PRACTICING THE PRACTICE

Sometimes we go through life, day in and day out, following a routine or a schedule that does not allow time or space to be joyful. There is always the next email to read, the next text or chat to respond to, the next meeting to attend, the next post to comment on, and so on. Sometimes, we just need to pause—to be intentional—so that we can discover the gift of the abundant joy of God in our midst.

When we think about finding joy, does it mean we have to go out and look for it, like a scavenger hunt? No, being intentional and finding joy in our daily lives just means making space and time for joy to find its way in. Psalm 46:10 reads, “Be still and know that I am God.” Can you find time every day to “Be still” and look for God’s presence in your day? If so, you may just find that joy makes its way into your life more often.

Let’s take some time to focus on God’s presence and consider how to deepen our joy practice through self-reflection and spiritual practice.

SELF-REFLECTION

While joy can be spontaneous, there are moments when finding joy requires some level of intentionality. Carve out time this week to spend time with God and block that time on your calendar, just as you would for a doctor’s appointment. When you are ready, take some time to reflect on these questions.

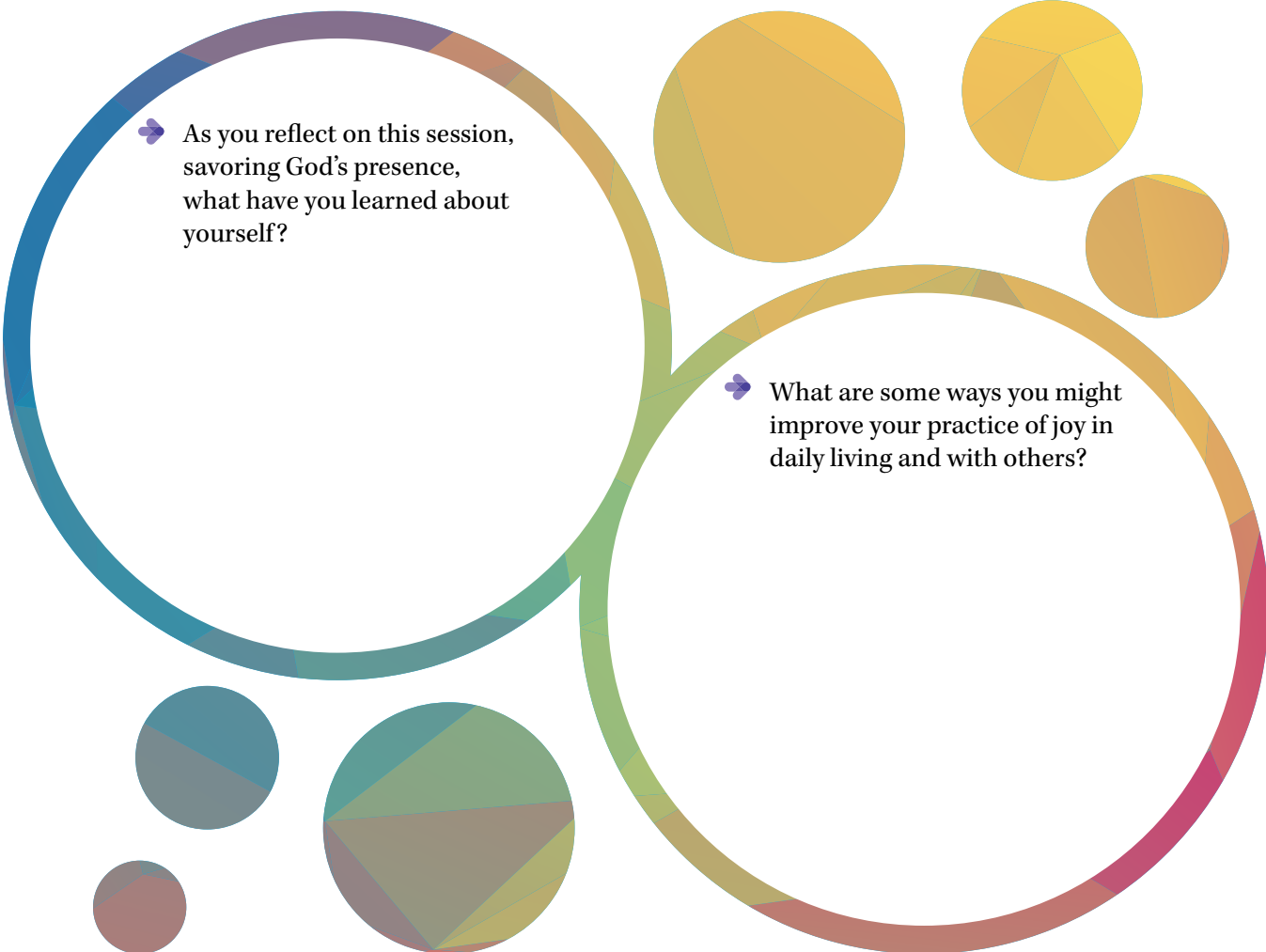
➤ When do you feel closest to God?

➤ How do you savor God’s presence?

➤ Where can you intentionally notice God’s presence in the next 24 hours?

GUIDED MEDITATION

1. Find a quiet space. No noise from the TV, cell phone notifications, or laptop chimes.
2. Be still and listen. Find your breath. Listen as you breathe in and out several times. What does it sound like?
3. Be still and listen. Focus on the sounds outside of your body. What do you hear: leaves rustling, birds chirping, maybe a watch ticking or the bubbles in a nearby fish tank?
4. No matter what you choose as a surrounding, if you are still and truly listen, you will hear things that you may not normally hear.
5. Now pick out one sound. It does not matter what that sound is as long as you are able to focus on it.
6. As you focus on that one sound, contemplate God's presence in the sound. How did the sound get there? How did God's hand play a role?
7. Be still and feel God's presence as you focus on the sound and find joy in being there, in that place, with God.
8. As you end the meditation, express gratitude to God for creation.



→ As you reflect on this session, savoring God's presence, what have you learned about yourself?

→ What are some ways you might improve your practice of joy in daily living and with others?

FOLLOWING JESUS

Often, it is not lack of faith but mere inattention that impedes our practice of joy. Faith invites us to see joy in God's creation, to notice, with intention, God's presence in our midst. Psalm 65 and Genesis 28 encourage us to pay attention and reflect on ways God's glory is shown through nature, dreams, and all things. To notice the particular beauty of nature around us is an entrance into its joy, joy that reflects the presence of our Creator, the hand behind the beauty.

Before we move to the next practice, remember that God is with you everywhere you go and in all that you do; take time to delight in God's presence. Think about everything you learned in this session and how it informs your practice of joy. As you do, listen to the YouTube video "We Will Go Out with Joy - by Andrew Donaldson and Hilary Seraph Donaldson" (bit.ly/FMGoOutJoy, 2:50).



CLOSING PRAYER

God, thank you for the gift of time. My senses are awakened to your presence, and I rejoice. Fill me with your Spirit, make me mindful of your presence in my daily living. These things I pray in the name of your beloved Child, Jesus Christ, and by the power of your Holy Spirit. Amen.