

**Bible Studies for Liberation, Volume 3**

# **Creating a Story of Place**



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All Biblical passages from the NIV unless otherwise noted.

This publication was made possible through the generosity of the Episcopal Evangelism Society. It is dedicated to the people I have met on the streets of America's cities and to the land and people I grew up with in rural western Washington. You are all my inspiration.

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# Introduction

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The United States has been a country of displaced peoples since its very beginnings. The policies and practices of the U.S. have created economic refugees, first in expelling Native Americans from their land and sequestering the survivors onto reservations and then ripping African peoples from their lands to work as slaves for large landholders. Poverty in the northeast sent settlers searching for home and land in the western states, on the land stolen from Native tribes. Immigrant groups, fleeing stark economic conditions in Europe, fled to U.S. cities to work. The Industrial Revolution, two World Wars, the Dust Bowl, and multiple other factors, drove both black and white rural peoples into the cities to find what work they could in factories and on wharves. Our economy was, and continues to be, an extractive one, designed to maximize profits, but ultimately poised to exhaust land, people, and resources.

One response to this reality can be building anew a sense of place and a connection to the communities of which we are a part. Current economic realities often do force us to move constantly. However, many communities around the country are beginning to create local economies and support networks for struggling people. Our country is full of economically declining communities, in both urban cores and rural towns. As communities move to create home and to create localized economies that will provide mutual support, they are turning more and more to talk about land and its importance—for food production, for economic support, and for our souls.

In the biblical story, land and people are intimately related, their destinies intertwined. At the root of the Hebrew Bible's critique

of economic injustice is the misuse of the land and its people. Without land, without home, without place, people are consistently dependent on economic forces beyond their control. Brueggemann writes; “The essential restlessness of our world is the voice the dispossessed demanding a share of the land.”

This study is designed to reflect a biblical theology of land and to assist a group within a community in creating and reflecting on their own stories of place, belonging, and land. This study is specifically designed with my own context in mind, the context of deeply impoverished rural towns in the U.S. It can be adapted for other contexts. It could be equally helpful for urban communities who are seeking to reconnect with land, gardening, and creating home. It is designed in the spirit of Christian Base Communities—to mobilize the community to reflect and act.

Poor and working class people are often deeply connected to the land and the natural world. It is my belief that it is in the hands of poor communities to recreate their own stories, their own relation to the land, broken by centuries of exploitation and economic abuse, and their own spiritualities rooted in those stories and that land.

# Creation Stories

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*This is the account of the heavens and the earth when they were created, when the Lord God made the earth and the heavens. Now no shrub had yet appeared on the earth and no plant had yet sprung up, for the Lord God had not sent rain on the earth and there was no one to work the ground, but streams came up from the earth and watered the whole surface of the ground. Then the Lord God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being. Now the Lord God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden; and there he put the man he had formed. The Lord God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground—trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. A river watering the garden flowed from Eden; from there it was separated into four headwaters. The name of the first is the Pishon; it winds through the entire land of Havilah, where there is gold. (The gold of that land is good; aromatic resin and onyx are also there.) The name of the second river is the Gihon; it winds through the entire land of Cush. The name of the third river is the Tigris; it runs along the east side of Ashur. And the fourth river is the Euphrates. The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. (Genesis 2:1-15)*

## **Summary**

In every place in the world, there are stories about how the world began. It seems that we all ask the question of where we have come from. Perhaps we ask that question because it helps us understand who we are and where we are going. Perhaps we also

ask the question because we want to know how we are connected to the place where we live.

Both the Christian and Jewish tradition relies on the story told by the Israelites about God creating the heavens and earth and putting Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. This story is in some ways much like other stories from the same time period, written in Babylon. One of these stories is the Enuma Elish, a Babylonian story about how the Sumarian gods get into a fight and create the world.

Each of these stories is rooted in the place they were written. When the Israelites told the story of creation, it was not simply a great story; it was a story about the different places that everyone who heard the story knew about. Eden was not simply a mythical garden—it was a place by the rivers that still flowed through the region. Some of the rivers mentioned in the text are still there; others may have been made up or were there at one time, when the stories were written. This was one of the ways that the people of Israel were able to connect to the land that they lived on. They told stories about where it had come from and who had given it to them. It was a gift of God to them, even though they often failed to take care of it.

One of the central points of this creation story is the relationship of people to the land. People were created from the ground. This story is of God creating man from the dust and breathing life into it. Our bodies, then, are made from the land and are related to it. Almost all creation stories talk about how related we are to the land and to all other living things.

Once human beings are made, they are placed in a garden to “tend and care for it.” Later on in this chapter, there is a verse that says that humans “have dominion” over the earth. This verse has been used for centuries to say that humans are the best of creation and

we should take whatever we want from the land. However, if God wanted us to “tend and care” for the land, that is a very different idea.

### **Study Questions**

The first three questions are designed to start a discussion about the text and its relation to the place where it was written. What was the geography of Israel like? What were the features of the land? Some maps may be helpful for this part of the discussion, noting of course that not all the rivers mentioned are on it or are identifiable by scholars. The third question also brings up a theological question—what is our relationship as humans to the land? The second three questions are designed to discuss the features and realities of the place where you are at. The answers will look very different depending on where you live and whether you are urban or rural. It could be helpful to bring to the discussion early stories from your region about origin. Sometimes these may be Native American; some of our stories are imported. It could be useful to discuss how dominant culture has shuffled Native stories aside and how little we know about them. It is also helpful to know something of local geography and to encourage discussion about it. People may know many stories about a local stream or stand of trees or a landmark or important hill or mountain. Make space for the telling of these stories. Finally, ask the important question of what it means for us, now, to be part of the land and to tend and care for it. What can we as a community, as a group, concretely do to care for the land we are a part of?

1. What is important about creation stories?
2. How does this story reflect the place where it was written? Why were rivers so important?

3. What does it mean for how we think about the land if humans are made from the land in this story?
4. What are creation stories that may have been told here, where we live? What creation stories could we tell?
5. In our creation stories, what would be the most important parts of the land and geography to include? Why?
6. What would it mean for us to take care of, or to tend and care for, the land that we are a part of?

# Land as a Gift

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*Then Moses climbed Mount Nebo from the plains of Moab to the top of Pisgah, across from Jericho. There the Lord showed him the whole land—from Gilead to Dan, all of Naphtali, the territory of Ephraim and Manasseh, all the land of Judah as far as the Mediterranean Sea, the Negev and the whole region from the Valley of Jericho, the City of Palms, as far as Zoar. Then the Lord said to him, “This is the land I promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob when I said, ‘I will give it to your descendants.’ I have let you see it with your eyes, but you will not cross over into it.” And Moses the servant of the Lord died there in Moab, as the Lord had said. He buried him in Moab, in the valley opposite Beth Peor, but to this day no one knows where his grave is. Moses was a hundred and twenty years old when he died, yet his eyes were not weak nor his strength gone.*

*(Deuteronomy 34:1-7)*

## **Summary**

In this story, Moses is about to die and God takes him up to the top of a mountain to see the promised land. Moses had led the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt and they had wandered in the desert for many years on their way to try to find a land to settle in. God has told Moses that he will not be able to enter the promised land himself, but instead shows him the land from a distance. Moses, now an old man, gets to see the land before he dies.

God tells Moses that the land is a gift. Ultimately, the land belonged to God and humans could only be the stewards of it. God, the owner of the land, could give the land as gift. The Israelites, who have wandered in the desert for forty years now that they were freed from slavery, owned nothing. They were a rag-tag ar-

my of ex-slaves and nomads. They were entitled to nothing. But God was giving them a gift—a home, a place to belong, a place for them to take care of. It is a story of a wandering people finding a place to belong.

Moses spent most of his life wandering and living in exile. He had been born in Egypt, had fled for his life and lived in exile in the desert, had come back to help free his people from Egypt, and spent the rest of his life wandering in the wilderness. Then, he died just before the people of Israel entered the promised land. Just a few months before. He never got home, just as many of us never get to find a home or go back to a home we once had. He was buried in a forgotten spot, not far from a home he never knew and never lived in. But he had one little glimpse and one great dream—that his people would get home.

### **Study Questions**

The first three questions revolve around the story of Moses and the theological implication of the land being a gift. The last of these questions, especially, challenges us to ask who really owns the land. If God is ultimately the owner of the land, then we are responsible to the divine for how we take care of it. When we are given a gift and asked to take care of something, we treat it with respect. The second group of questions again brings us to the here and now, asking us to discuss our own area, its landmarks and resources, and what connects people to it. It is designed to evoke a conversation around favorite places and how we are connected to them. For some, special places may not be in the area in which they now live—people have connections to their birthplaces or to a place they settled for awhile. Because, in our world, people wander so much, it is common for our connections to be in many places without having found deep roots anywhere. Question five challenges us to reflect on the history of the land in the place we

live—who has controlled it, how it has or has not been cared for, and most importantly what should be done to care for it now. Of course, most poor communities have no actual economic control of the land they live on and this may be part of the discussion. Why is that? How can we change that? If one of the ways that poor people are controlled is by limited access to the land, how can poor people and communities take care of the gift that is rightfully theirs? The last question is a more personal one, exploring our relation to place and land. It may seem a morbid question, but one of the most important questions people have asked over time, especially people deeply rooted in place, is where they want to be buried. It is a question that invites us again to think about the places where we are rooted and what that means to us spiritually.

1. Why do you think it was so important to Moses to see the land before he died?
2. What does it mean for the land to be a gift?
3. If the land is a gift, who ultimately owns it and to whom do we answer for how we use it?
4. If you were to stand on top of a landmark, what parts of this area would you see? What are some of the important places and why? Are there any places particularly special to you?
5. How should we take care of this land if it is a gift from God? How has the land been cared for? Who controls it?
6. If you had a choice, where would you want to be buried? Why?

## City versus Country

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*The Israelites again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, after Ehud died. So the Lord sold them into the hand of King Jabin of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor; the commander of his army was Sisera, who lived in Harosheth-ha-goiim. Then the Israelites cried out to the Lord for help; for he had nine hundred chariots of iron, and had oppressed the Israelites cruelly for twenty years. At that time Deborah, a prophetess, wife of Lappidoth, was judging Israel. She used to sit under the palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim; and the Israelites came up to her for judgement. She sent and summoned Barak son of Abinoam from Kedesh in Naphtali, and said to him, ‘The Lord, the God of Israel, commands you, “Go, take position at Mount Tabor, bringing ten thousand from the tribe of Naphtali and the tribe of Zebulun. I will draw out Sisera, the general of Jabin’s army, to meet you by the Wadi Kishon with his chariots and his troops; and I will give him into your hand.” ’ Barak said to her, ‘If you will go with me, I will go; but if you will not go with me, I will not go.’ And she said, ‘I will surely go with you; nevertheless, the road on which you are going will not lead to your glory, for the Lord will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman.’ Then Deborah got up and went with Barak to Kedesh. Barak summoned Zebulun and Naphtali to Kedesh; and ten thousand warriors went up behind him; and Deborah went up with him.*

*Now Heber the Kenite had separated from the other Kenites, that is, the descendants of Hobab the father-in-law of Moses, and had encamped as far away as Elon-bezaananim, which is near Kedesh. When Sisera was told that Barak son of Abinoam had gone up to Mount Tabor, Sisera called out all his chariots, nine hundred chariots of iron, and all the troops who were with him,*

*from Harosheth-ha-goiim to the Wadi Kishon. Then Deborah said to Barak, 'Up! For this is the day on which the Lord has given Sisera into your hand. The Lord is indeed going out before you.' So Barak went down from Mount Tabor with ten thousand warriors following him. And the Lord threw Sisera and all his chariots and all his army into a panic\* before Barak; Sisera got down from his chariot and fled away on foot, while Barak pursued the chariots and the army to Harosheth-ha-goiim. All the army of Sisera fell by the sword; no one was left. (Judges 4:1-16, NRSV)*

## **Summary**

In the time of the early Israelites, the economic system of the region would have been a system of city states. This means that there would be large, walled cities throughout the area, each of them independent from each other, controlling all the land around it. The majority of the population would have lived on the land and in small villages controlled by these city states. Some Bible scholars believe that much of the conflict in the Hebrew Bible was between these peasants living on the land and the rulers of the Canaanite city states.

In this story, the people of Israel were under the control of the city state of Hazor, ruled by a King Jabin and his army general Sisera. It was clearly a powerful city with many resources and a vast army. The peasants of Israel, the people who were living outside Hazor and in small villages working the land were oppressed. It was common in this time for the land to be owned by the city state, not by the small farmers and workers, and the king would have demanded heavy taxes on whatever was produced. He may have drafted their sons into the army and their daughters into service or prostitution.

In this time, however, there was a local ruler or judge named Deborah. She was a prophet, gifted by God to bring God's word

to the people. She would also sit under a large tree and people would take their disputes to her for her to solve. Eventually, she decided enough was enough. Her people were suffering too much and it was time to revolt against the king and his city state.

Enough taxes. Enough land grabs. It was time. She called on a local military man to take charge, but he was too afraid to go alone, so Deborah agreed to help lead the peasant army herself.

And they won. The small farmers and local craftspeople and villagers took up arms, formed an army with a woman prophet at their head, and soundly defeated the army of the city state of Hazor. They even killed the army general. The countryside had won, for once. The people that those in power thought were weak and useless were able to rise up and take back their land.

### **Study Questions**

The first three questions center around what conditions may have been for early Israelite peasants in the book of Judges. They center around questions of courage and resistance in the text. The text makes it clear that the city state of Hazor was powerful, with resources and tools, including iron, which would have given them a clear advantage in battle. It is no wonder Barak was unsure and frightened. To lead a peasant army into battle against an urban elite must have been a sight to behold. The second set of questions asks us to think about the parallels in our own day and our own economic system. There are many answers to these questions. We live under late capitalism, a neoliberal system that has given economic power to large state-sponsored corporations. Labor in the U.S. is often offshored to other countries where labor is cheap. As a post-industrial economy, most labor is service based and if people work on land, it is land they do not own. Rural areas function as a colony of large cities who extract natural resources for urban use until they are discarded in a globalizing economy.

Urban and rural people increasingly do not have access to land or jobs. What is people's experience of these realities? How can we challenge these systems? How, perhaps, can we build more localized economies where we all have a share in land and in resources? And, do we have the courage to do it? There are stories of communities who are doing it—the Zapatistas in Chiapas, Oaxacan villagers, South African and Indian land occupations, and many more. I wonder if these stories too might inspire us.

1. What do you think of Deborah and her courage? Do you think Barak had a right to be scared?
2. What do you think it would have been like to live under a city state system?
3. What do you think gave these rural villagers the courage to stand up and defend themselves?
4. What kind of economic system do we live under? What does it look like for us? Who has power and who does not?
5. How are cities and rural areas divided and separated in the U.S. today?
6. How can we challenge our current economic system?

# The Land Made New

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*The word of the Lord came to me: “Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy and say to them: ‘This is what the Sovereign Lord says: Woe to you shepherds of Israel who only take care of yourselves! Should not shepherds take care of the flock? You eat the curds, clothe yourselves with the wool and slaughter the choice animals, but you do not take care of the flock. You have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured. You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost. You have ruled them harshly and brutally. So they were scattered because there was no shepherd, and when they were scattered they became food for all the wild animals. My sheep wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill. They were scattered over the whole earth, and no one searched or looked for them.*

*“Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the Lord: As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign Lord, because my flock lacks a shepherd and so has been plundered and has become food for all the wild animals, and because my shepherds did not search for my flock but cared for themselves rather than for my flock, therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the Lord: This is what the Sovereign Lord says: I am against the shepherds and will hold them accountable for my flock. I will remove them from tending the flock so that the shepherds can no longer feed themselves. I will rescue my flock from their mouths, and it will no longer be food for them.*

*“For this is what the Sovereign Lord says: I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so will I look after my*

*sheep. I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on a day of clouds and darkness. I will bring them out from the nations and gather them from the countries, and I will bring them into their own land. I will pasture them on the mountains of Israel, in the ravines and in all the settlements in the land. I will tend them in a good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel will be their grazing land. There they will lie down in good grazing land, and there they will feed in a rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. I myself will tend my sheep and have them lie down, declares the Sovereign Lord. I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak, but the sleek and the strong I will destroy. I will shepherd the flock with justice. (Ezekiel 34:1-16)*

## **Summary**

Ezekiel was written during a time of exile, when the people of Israel had been conquered by the Babylonians, their cities and towns destroyed, and many people taken captive and brought to live and work in Babylon. The prophet Ezekiel had been in Jerusalem during the siege and was taken captive himself and he writes these words from Babylon to his people, who were longing to return to the land of their birth.

In this passage, Ezekiel prophesies against the leaders of Israel, who had profited off of the people but had not cared for them or practiced good leadership. Ezekiel says they are like shepherds who use the wool, meat, and milk from their flocks, but do not take care of them. They don't take care of the sick or find the lost sheep; instead, they abuse them and let wild animals attack them. Many of the prophets condemned the leadership of Israel, both before and during the exile, who were more concerned about wealth and power than the welfare of the people of the country.

Ezekiel prophesies that God will remove these leaders from Israel because of what they have done. Instead, God himself will care for his people and set good leaders over them. Though they live in exile now, God promises to rescue them and bring them back to their land. The land will be rich and beautiful, the lost will be found, the injured will be healed, and they will have justice. The people who have been neglected and hurt and oppressed will take possession of the land and enjoy its bounty.

For people who had lost everything, who had lost a whole way of life, this must have given them great hope. Even though they were strangers in a strange land, even though they had their livelihoods taken away and their lives disrupted, God would rescue them. They would again enjoy the fruits of their labor and the bounty of the land they loved.

### **Study Questions**

When talking about justice for people and for land, it is appropriate and important to talk about leadership and policies that oppress. Ezekiel spares no punches in his denunciation of Israel's leaders. The first three questions again deal with the context of the text. It might be useful to know if anyone in the group has experience taking care of livestock and has insights into this context. Livestock are often completely at the mercy of their caretakers and poor care can lead to terrible conditions, just as poor leadership can lead to much suffering in a town or a country. In the second half of the discussion, there is an opening to talk about leadership in our own context, either local or national or both. There is a growing lack of trust between U.S. leadership and their constituents. Why? What does oppression look like in our context? There is a growing inequality between wealth and poverty in this country, which is partly the fault of our leaders. This inequality often shows up in local politics as well. Who had wealth and

power and who does not? Who controls the land and is it cared for or exploited? The last question is meant to spur discussion about what a small group of people in a community can do to counter injustice. What would it look like to take care of the land where we live? How can we, in some small way, contribute to caring for it? There is a link between taking care of land and taking care of people. There is also room to discuss what the land might mean to people and how they find connection to it.

1. There are many other mentions of leadership problems in Israel by the prophets. What do you think Ezekiel is talking about when he compares Israel's leaders to shepherds who exploit their flocks?
2. What kinds of ethics does God seem to require of those in leadership?
3. Imagine you were in exile in Babylon. How would you hear the promise of returning to your homeland?
4. In the U.S., do you think we also struggle with failures in our leadership? What kind of failures? Are there similarities to Ezekiel's words?
5. How in particular has the land and the people of this area suffered (or not) as a result of bad leadership or bad policies?
6. What would returning to the land look like for us in our communities?

# Finding God in Nature

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*God] makes springs pour water into the ravines;  
it flows between the mountains.*

*They give water to all the beasts of the field;  
the wild donkeys quench their thirst.*

*The birds of the sky nest by the waters;  
they sing among the branches.*

*He waters the mountains from his upper chambers;  
the land is satisfied by the fruit of his work.*

*He makes grass grow for the cattle,  
and plants for people to cultivate—  
bringing forth food from the earth:*

*wine that gladdens human hearts,  
oil to make their faces shine,  
and bread that sustains their hearts.*

*The trees of the LORD are well watered,  
the cedars of Lebanon that he planted.*

*There the birds make their nests;  
the stork has its home in the junipers.*

*The high mountains belong to the wild goats;  
the crags are a refuge for the hyrax...*

*All creatures look to you  
to give them their food at the proper time.*

*When you give it to them,  
they gather it up;*

*when you open your hand,  
they are satisfied with good things.*

*When you hide your face,  
they are terrified;*

*when you take away their breath,  
they die and return to the dust.  
When you send your Spirit,  
they are created,  
and you renew the face of the ground.*  
(Psalm 104:10-18, 27-30)

## **Summary**

In this passage, the Psalmist sings about creation. It is a long poem, or song, and was perhaps meant to be sung in a liturgy or service. This song rejoices in the power of God, who sustains all things, who makes water—that substance so important for all life—to flow in rivers and streams, who makes the land fertile and grass to grow for livestock, and who sustains the great forests. It was clearly written to a people who lived close to the land. In Israel, the climate was very dry and rivers and the land near rivers were incredibly important. All crops had to be grown in river valleys and the water had to be carefully stewarded. Some of the most important crops for ancient Israelites would have been grapes, used for wine, olives, used for food and oil, and grain crops grown on the river bottoms. They would have also had livestock, especially sheep and goats, since they were small and hardy and could live off of the drier hillsides. In the north of Israel, there were great forests of cedar, called the “cedars of Lebanon” in the Bible. These forests provided lumber for big building projects, of course, but they were also prized for their beauty. This northern forested area probably received more rainfall, making it green and beautiful.

This poem is rooted deeply in this land, this place. All of the images that are sung about are about places that the people hearing would have known and cared about. What is interesting about the poem is that God is not just interested in providing for humans.

God provides for all of creation—water not just for people but for animals and trees not just for lumber but for birds too. The mountains are for wild goats. God cares, in this poem, for all the land and everything is connected. Humans and animals and plant life are all dependent on water and rain and ultimately on God.

What is even more interesting is that God is not some abstract figure in the sky either, taking care of creation as if he is not part of it. God’s spirit instead moves in all life, breathing with it and renewing all life. Perhaps this is why so many of us feel closest to God while in the natural world. Perhaps the Psalmist is celebrating the fact that God not only cares for all of creation but also moves among all things and is a part of it. Sometimes we call this “sacramental.” We find God in everyday things, like bread and wine during Eucharist, but also in the woods or with our dog or with each other. God is in the everyday things and God is in creation.

### **Study Questions**

The questions are meant to start a discussion about the theological and personal implications of the Psalm. First, the song is rooted in a particular place and time, which is important, because we never experience the land in the abstract. We experience the land in place—in the park, in the garden, in the woods we walk in, by the river, looking at the mountains on the horizon. The natural landscape, the climate, and the places we are familiar with shape our relationship to the land. In the Psalmist’s theology, God sustains all things and is intimately involved in the life of all things. What does this mean for us? Many of us find God and a deep sense of spiritual in creation and the natural world. We can find a wholeness in creation and a sense of being part of something far bigger than ourselves. God is made known to us, not only in the breaking of bread in church on Sunday, but in the life of the world around

us. What would it look like if we ourselves wrote about this? What would a song of creation look like in our part of the world? Perhaps a way to conclude this study would be to write a short “song of creation,” reflecting on the landscape and land you live on.

1. How does the Psalmist incorporate the parts of the natural world that are important to the people of Israel?
2. The Psalmist places emphasis on the fact that God cares for all creation. How does this change or affect how you think about God?
3. What is the role of the Spirit of God in creation for the Psalmist?
4. How do you relate to creation? What are the most amazing things about the natural world for you?
5. Do you experience God in creation? Where are you closest to God?
6. If we were to write a song or poem about our part of the world and the land, what would it look like?

# Jesus and the Land

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*Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them. He said: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 5:1-10)*

## **Summary**

Jesus was born and did most of his ministry in a northern part of Israel/Palestine called Galilee. Galilee was some distance from Jerusalem and was often thought of as a backwater area with small villages. It was a place where many cultures met and where many small groups and sects were formed. Galilee was looked down on by both Rome and people in Jerusalem. It was poor and it was rural. Not unlike small towns and rural areas in the U.S., Galilee was kind of the “hillbilly” region of Palestine. This is where Jesus spent most of his life, some of it homeless, and gave most of his teachings, including this one.

Jesus taught these Galilean small farmers and villagers a new way of living and being in the world. In this passage, which we usually call “The Beatitudes,” Jesus teaches that the Kingdom of God is very different from the values of the world we live in. The people who will be blessed and happiest are not the most powerful or the wealthiest or the strongest. Instead, Jesus has a different value

system. God blesses those whose lives are often a struggle—those who are powerless, who are poor, who are struggling, who have reason to mourn, and who are hungry and thirsty. The Kingdom of Heaven belongs to them.

Most people in Galilee would have been struggling and powerless and poor. They lived under the Roman empire and both Roman and religious leaders made their lives difficult with taxes, with rules, with the legal system, and with murder at times. Most of them probably worked as craftspeople or as small farmers, working on land that belonged to large landholders. Yet, Jesus tells them that, in God's economy, they were blessed and they were part of the kingdom of heaven. God would show them mercy and they would be filled and comforted. They would also inherit the earth, the land.

Even though the cards seemed stacked against them and even though the land belonged officially to Rome and to large landowners, it would not always be that way. A famous bible scholar, Walter Brueggemann says it like this; "The meek, the ones claiming no home and living with homelessness, do indeed inherit the land." So, in God's new economy announced by Jesus, the tables are turned. Those who own everything do not truly have the power they claim. Those who are poor and powerless will be blessed by God and will inherit the earth.

### **Study Questions**

It is powerful to point out Jesus' context, as a Galilean carpenter who lived most of his life in an obscure place, wandering and sometimes homeless. The first three questions ask about that context and the words of Jesus in that context. Jesus comes as "God with us," not in Rome or even in Jerusalem, but on the edge of the empire and in poverty. And he declares the poor and the powerless great in the kingdom of God. He reverses the ethic of the

world and says boldly that, to God, the hungry poor are the ones who are blessed. Those who grasp for more and more, who greedily accumulate wealth and power, will lose in the end. The land is included in this, as it would be for a Galilean prophet steeped in the traditions of the Hebrew prophets. The land, which is ultimately God's, is given by God to those who struggle and lack and are poor.

So, what does this mean for us today? What does that mean in our own communities? Jesus comes to us here and now, among the struggling and suffering and powerless, just as he always has. Many of us live in places not different than where Jesus lived and worked. Small towns that are ignored. The parts of the city no one else wants to see or go to. In urban tent cities or underground hideouts or under bridges. Dying farm communities. All of these places. What do the Beatitudes mean to us in these places? Is the land really, ultimately, in God's economy, ours? How do we start living this out in our lives now, in hope for the coming of the kingdom of God?

1. What kind of life do you think Jesus lived in Galilee?  
Why do you think God chose to reveal the divine in Jesus in Galilee and not in a more important place in the world?
2. What are the principles of the kingdom of God according to Jesus? How do these principles reverse the order we often see in the world?
3. What do you think Jesus meant when he said that the meek shall inherit the earth?
4. How is where we live or where you come from similar or different than the Galilee of Jesus' day?

5. What is the most important statement of the Beatitudes for you? Why?
6. What does it mean, here and now, for the meek to inherit the land or the earth?

# Longing for Renewal

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*I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently. In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God. And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who[i] have been called according to his purpose.*  
(Roman 8:18-28)

## Summary

A few decades after Jesus' death and resurrection, Paul began teaching and writing to the followers of Jesus. Paul was one of the most influential authors and theologians in the history of Christianity and he wrote many parts of the New Testament. In this passage, he is writing to a group of Jesus followers in

Rome, explaining to them what he thinks of Jesus. For Paul, the death and resurrection of Jesus are central. In some ways, it is like a cycle of life, death, and rebirth. Paul says that those who follow Jesus experience this death and resurrection, not only in the future, but in our everyday lives. So does the rest of creation.

Paul writes that all of creation, us human included, have been groaning and longing for liberation and redemption. I think of this like winter in the forest, when many things hibernate and some plants die, and everything seems to be waiting with bated breath for the coming of spring. There are storms and trees fall and die and some animals starve. But, in the spring, the trees that fell give life to new plants and animals and the places that seemed quiet and dead now come alive and flourish. So, now, we experience a good deal of struggle and suffering in our lives. And so does the earth, the land. The land is not always well cared for and our rivers and our forests and our fields struggle too.

In all of this, Paul tells us to have hope. Jesus was raised from the dead and so too all of creation will experience resurrection. For now, in this time, we have the Spirit who longs for liberation with us and who brings our prayers to God and who works good in the world. We have need of patience, but we can also trust in the Spirit's power. Spring and resurrection will come.

### **Study Questions**

This study opens up the possibility of talking about liberation and what it means—to Paul, to Paul's audience, and to us today. Paul is conscious of a whole created order that is suffering and struggling, in bondage to death. Some of this is implicit in the created order, but some of it is also a result of sin, particularly human sin. In Paul's context, urban areas were sprawling centers of dirt and filth and disease. Nothing would have grown, the riv-

ers were heavily polluted, and, while a wealthy few lived in clean and spacious mansions, most people lived in tenements with open sewers and rampant disease. Roman armies marched through the empire, destroying farmland and forest, villages and cities during times of war. Conquered lands would sometimes be sown with salt to prevent anything from growing for generations. Creation indeed was groaning with all of humanity. What did resurrection mean in this context? What was liberation? Freedom from what and to do what? In our own time, we face crises for humanity and for all of creation. Our rivers too are polluted and our soil is depleting and our air quality is deteriorating. Our cities are often places where things can no longer grow and pollution is everywhere, especially for people living in poverty. There is a strong relationship between poverty and destruction of the land. However, many of us still live close to the natural world. How do we still see signs of resurrection and life? What does liberation look like, now, for us and for the land we live on? What does liberation mean for us? Liberation is not simply spiritual—it involves our whole lives and whole beings and indeed all of creation. It is freedom not only from sin but from structural sin, from oppression, and from destruction and degradation.

1. The people Paul is writing to live in the center of the empire, in the largest city of Europe. What do you think a struggling creation looked like to them?
2. What do you think Jesus' death and resurrection mean for creation?
3. What kind of liberation is all creation, including humans, looking for according to Paul?

4. What does a struggling creation look like today, where we live? For humanity? For the land?
5. Have you observed the cycle of death and rebirth in nature? What does it look like from your perspective?
6. What kind of liberation are you waiting for?

# A New Earth

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*Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. ‘He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death’ or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.” He who was seated on the throne said, “I am making everything new!” Then he said, “Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.” He said to me: “It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To the thirsty I will give water without cost from the spring of the water of life. Those who are victorious will inherit all this, and I will be their God and they will be my children. (Revelation 22:1-7)*

## **Summary**

This final passage is from the final book of the Bible. The Book of Revelation was written late in the first century, after the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans, in a time when the power of the Roman empire was oppressing many, including the followers of Jesus. It was a time of fear and uncertainty. People did not know what was going to happen next. Many of Jesus’ followers who had lived in Palestine were now exiles and had seen the destruction of their homeland and way of life. The Empire seemed too powerful to resist and it was easy to just give in to despair.

Revelation is a series of visions and is a kind of literature that was popular in its time, called apocalyptic literature. It used symbols

and stories to talk about the end of the world and about hope and about good and evil. In some ways, it is very much like science fiction or fantasy (think of Star Wars, Star Trek, or Lord of the Rings). It was like creating an alternate universe to explain some of the realities we all face.

This passage is from the end of the book. There have been stories of demons and great beasts coming out of the sea and great battles. It ends with a dream of a new and restored world. The world as we know it has ended and now, out of heaven, comes a new earth and a new great city of Jerusalem. God is fully present among all people and among all new creation. There are beautiful rivers and glorious trees and, best of all, everyone is truly happy. No more death or pain or tears. It is a vision, a dream we all wish we could see sometime. All our struggles are over, all the trauma, all the suffering, and the world is made anew. No more Roman emperors to give orders or soldiers killing your loved ones—just God sitting among you and loving you. No more war and destruction, no more broken land, or suffering people. What a vision! What a hope!

### **Study Questions**

When Jerusalem was destroyed in 70 AD, about forty years after Jesus' death, it must have seemed like the end of the world to the people who lived there. Horrific stories are told of the long siege, about the groups of rebels who took up arms to defend their people and towns, and of the ultimate burning of the city. Most of the inhabitants were taken into slavery. People watched their homeland destroyed—both land and people. Apocalyptic literature is always written in a time of crisis, when it feels like the world is ending. Because, for them, it is ending. Whole ways of life and ways of being are ended. People watch loved ones die and are forced to move. The land too suffers as armies march through it

and farmland and forests are destroyed. The rise of interest in the end of the world—whether Biblical stories like Revelation or Mayan prophecies or post-apocalyptic stories—have skyrocketed over the decades in the U.S. More and more people are feeling like their world is ending, as there are fewer jobs and industries end and more and more people end up in poverty. We live in a time of great change and great loss. Many people have lost a whole way of life. People read and watch films about the end of the world, usually science fiction or fantasy genres and they strike close to home. They let us talk about our deep fears. What are those fears? How do we deal with them? And, finally, in the middle of all of this, what kind of new world do we want? What would it look like for people and for the land itself? When we talk about liberation, we are talking about this very vision and how we can start to live it in the world, here and now, as we hope for a better future in the hands of God.

1. What do you think it would have been like to live through the destruction of your homeland?
2. What do you think about John's vision about the end of the world? Why do you think people were thinking the world was ending?
3. What happens to the land and to all people in this vision?
4. Have you ever felt like it's the end of the world?
5. What are stories that remind you of apocalyptic literature in our own day? What kind of stories do you enjoy that are like this? What do they mean to you?
6. What would your vision for a new creation look like? What would it look like for where you live now, for both people and land?

# Your Own Story of Place

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**Creation Stories** What are our creation stories?

**The Land as Gift** What are the important places, resources, landscapes, features, and favorite places here in this place?

**City and Country** What does our current economic system look like? How does it relate to people and to the land?

**Land Made New** What would returning to land look like here?

**Finding God in Nature** What would a poem or song about this place look like?

**Jesus and the Land** If the meek shall inherit the earth, what does that mean for us? How do we start living that reality?

**Longing for Renewal** How does creation struggle here in this place? Where can we find liberation?

**A New Earth** What would your vision of a new creation look like?