



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 Divine Hours Spent
Hiking with God
(*Traveling Well*, pp. 28-37)

What do you think?

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Christian Reflection

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Divine Hours Spent Hiking with God

If you want to know where you are going, it helps to know where you are. As Cindy Crosby began to truly look, listen, and see what was in front of her on her hikes, she learned the language of tallgrass prairie, the language of her new home. And she discovered, as Belden Lane puts it, “The wildest, most dangerous trails are always the ones within.”

Prayer

Lord, you are the creator and sustainer of all that is. And yet, the immensity of creation does not distract you from caring personally for every creature in it.

In our coming and going, draw near to us and stay.

You do not daydream or become weary in that care. We thank you for watching over us with diligence, and for guiding us so that we do not stumble or fall.

In our coming and going, draw near to us and stay. Amen.

Scripture Reading: Psalm 95:1-6

Meditation†

The mockingbird took a single step into the air and dropped. His wings were still folded against his sides as though he were singing from a limb and not falling, accelerating thirty-two feet per second per second, through empty air. Just a breath before he would have been dashed to the ground, he unfurled his wings with exact, deliberate care, revealing the broad bars of white, spread his elegant, white-banded tail, and so floated onto the grass. I had just rounded a corner when his insouciant step caught my eye; there was no one else in sight. The fact of his free fall was like the old philosophical conundrum about the tree that falls in the forest. The answer must be, I think, that beauty and grace are performed whether or not we will or sense them. The least we can do is try to be there.

Annie Dillard

Reflection

Since she so loved the beautiful landscapes of the natural world, Cindy Crosby “moped around the first few months, regretting the move,” when her husband’s work took them to live in the suburbs of Chicago. The subdivision’s manicured uniformity and the corn monoculture of surrounding farms left her hungering for the loveliness and majesty of wild places.

As she walked around her neighborhood (just to ‘get away’), she looked at things more closely. The travel distance was short, but the destination changed her: Crosby was captivated by remnants of tall-grass prairie. The change of perspective this brought to her vision and heart occurred by stages.

- ▶ *She discovered the intertwined natural and human history of the place where she lived* – vast grasslands which isolated pioneer families had encountered, which spurred John Deere’s agricultural invention, and, in turn, were almost lost forever.
- ▶ *She came to love the diverse plants and animals, permanent and migratory, that share the place with her* – waves of sandhill cranes dancing northward in the March sky, western chorus frogs crying out in the woods,



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and a kaleidoscope of perennials like prairie dropseed, rattlesnake master, and pasque flower emerging from the ashes of a burned prairie.

- ▶ *She learned to care for the prairie with other volunteers, setting prescribed burns that mimic the lightning fires necessary for the grassland's survival, but long suppressed by humans.*
- ▶ *She became aware of tragic consequences of careless treatment of the land by humans—how the American elm and ash were lost to blights exacerbated by suburban monoculture. So, she welcomed a more diverse ecosystem around her backyard pond.*

Why do Crosby and the other volunteers care so much for the tallgrass prairie? "Some enjoy socializing outdoors. Some care about environmental issues. Others come out for a day to pull tall, sweet white clover or clear brush because they love the exercise outdoors. Some fall in love with the prairie," she writes. "I come to the prairie for all those reasons, plus another. The prairie is where I hike and feel closest to God."

"God is invisible, often silent," Crosby admits. "But the tallgrass is always there, waiting, evidence that I am not forgotten. Willoway Brook runs fast with snowmelt in the spring, with clouds of ebony jewelwing damselflies in the summer, and ladies tresses orchids in the fall. I try to be there to be astonished. To bear witness. And to listen...just in case."

Study Questions

1. Develop a plan to learn more about the place where you live—the natural history of its plants, animals, landforms, and waterways; the weather patterns and seasons; the visibility of stars; and how well people have cared for the area through their industries and agriculture.
2. Consider the features of the place where you live that constantly draw you to God. Do some features occlude experiencing God's presence? Where do you travel in that place "to bear witness" to its beauty and grace and "to listen" for God?
3. Plan a short travel experience—a neighborhood walk or longer hike, a book to read or photos to enjoy—to share with a friend the beauty and grace of the place where you live.

Departing Hymn: "For the Beauty of the Earth" (vv. 1, 2)

For the beauty of the earth,
for the glory of the skies,
for the love which from our birth
over and around us lies,
*Lord of all, to you 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,
*Lord of all, to you we raise
this, our hymn of grateful praise.*

Folliott S. Pierpoint (1864), alt.
Tune: DIX

† Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, Harper Perennial Modern Classics edition (New York: HarperCollins, 2013 [1974]), 10.

Divine Hours Spent Hiking with God

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Meditation	Meditation
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 2 and 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To (re)discover and share with others more of the created beauty and grace of the place where one lives.
2. To value attentively traveling, both physically and by study, through the place where we live.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 6-7 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Traveling Well (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn "For the Beauty of the Earth," locate the familiar tune DIX in your church's hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ (www.hymntime.com/tch/) or Hymnary.org (www.hymnary.org).

Begin with Some Questions

"Do you know where you are?" Steven Bouma-Prediger asks his readers at the beginning of *For the Beauty of the Earth: A Christian Vision for Creation Care* (2001, 2010). "What is the soil like around your home? Silty loam? Loamy sand? Sandy clay? Rocks and pebbles? Wet or dry? A few precious inches of soil atop ancient Canadian shield, or eighteen inches of rich, fertile gardener's gold? What are five agricultural plants in your region? Corn, wheat, alfalfa, beans, sorghum? Or maybe grapes or cherries or oranges? And how long is the growing season? A precious few weeks? Or all year long? What geological events or processes have influenced the land where you live? Glaciers, volcanoes, earthquakes? Uplifting mountains or rivers carving canyons to the sea? What confluence of water and wind?"

In this amazing passage, Bouma-Prediger goes on to ask details about the trees that live where nearby, the birds that are resident and migratory, the flowers that bloom and when, the animals that share one's place, the stage of the moon last night, and the constellations that were visible in the sky. "From what direction do the prevailing winds blow? From where does your water come? To where does your garbage go?" (*For the Beauty of the Earth*, 2-3).

Knowing where we are in this way, with what he calls an "ecological perception of place," enables us to love more deeply and care more effectively for God's creation. It also helps us appreciate God's love for us and receive God's daily care. Walking our own neighborhood with careful attention to the creation and the Creator may be the most important traveling we do. In this study, Cindy Crosby's trekking is an example of such traveling well.

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by inviting members to read aloud responsively the prayer in the study guide.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Psalm 95:1-6 from a modern translation.

Meditation

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

Reflection

In order to experience the beauty and grace of God's creation, and be drawn by it into deeper love with our Creator, we need not travel great distances to unusual and majestic landscapes. The examples of Cindy Crosby and Annie Dillard, the poetry of the Psalmist, and the hymn of Folliott Pierpoint remind us that we only need to look around us with wonder and attention. Use this study to value and plan those short trips into nature that can draw us to love God and to care better for the places where we live.

Study Questions

1. Encourage members to share their varying interests in and knowledge about the different facets of the place where you live. What drew them to that particular facet, and how did they become interested and knowledgeable about it? What resources – books, Internet sites, local experts, environmental groups, history clubs, and so on – would they recommend to others who share their interest?

Form small groups based on a few of your members' varying interests, and ask them to form a plan – a walk, a book to share, an expert to interview, a service project, and so on – to develop their knowledge of and nurture their care for the place where they live.

2. Ask members if they have a favorite place nearby that they go to experience the beauty and grace of God's creation and to draw near to God. Perhaps it is a retreat in their home, a local park, or a neighborhood walk. What features of that place – its plants and animals, seasonal changes and migrations, times of day, dark night sky, solitude, human interactions, personal memories, vistas, landforms, waterways, architecture, and so on – draw them to God?

Are there features of the place where you live which make it more difficult to experience the presence of God? It might be excessive or unpleasant noise, hideous architecture, environmental damage from careless agriculture or industry, light pollution, unsafe streets, a distasteful personal or cultural history in the area, and so on. How do members look past these features, block them out temporarily, or work to correct them?

3. Part of the joy of recognizing God through the beauty and grace of God's creation is sharing this experience with others – family members, a few friends, guests on vacation, a group of neighborhood children, a curious young person, a person with restricted ability to travel, and so on. We not only help and encourage them, but we also see our place in a fresh way through their eyes and come to love more aspects of it.

With some particular individual or group in mind, begin planning a short travel experience for them to learn more about and enjoy the place where you live. How will you share the beauty and grace that you have experienced there? How will you prepare their hearts to encounter the Creator in that place?

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.