



INTERFAITH
RAINFOREST
INITIATIVE

AN EVANGELICAL CHRISTIAN TOOLKIT ON FOREST PROTECTION

RESOURCES FOR RELIGIOUS
LEADERS AND FAITH COMMUNITIES

ABOUT THIS TOOLKIT

This toolkit is part of a series developed by the Interfaith Rainforest Initiative meant to inform and inspire faith communities to action to help safeguard tropical forests and their inhabitants. The Initiative believes the time has come for a worldwide movement for the care of tropical forests, one that is grounded in the inherent value of forests, and inspired by the values, ethics, and moral guidance of indigenous peoples and faith communities.

This Evangelical Christian Toolkit presents a series of reflections, meditations, prayers, talking points, and lesson plans aimed at practitioners in the Evangelical Church, and assembled with the help of Rev. Dr. Neddy Astudillo. It is not meant to be exhaustive or final, but represents a living document that can evolve over time with the help and for the benefit of faith communities.

INTERFAITH RAINFOREST INITIATIVE

The Interfaith Rainforest Initiative is an international, multi-faith alliance that is working to bring moral urgency and faith-based leadership to efforts to end tropical deforestation. It is a platform for religious leaders and faith communities to work hand-in-hand with indigenous peoples, governments, NGOs and businesses on actions that protect rainforest and the rights of those that serve as their guardians.

QUESTIONS?

The Interfaith Rainforest Initiative is eager to work with you to protect tropical forests and the rights of indigenous peoples. Contact us at info@interfaithrainforest.org.

PARTNERS

The Interfaith Rainforest Initiative welcomes engagement by all organizations, institutions and individuals of good faith and conscience that are committed to the protection, restoration and sustainable management of rainforests.



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OPENING REFLECTION

THE FOREST STORY IS OUR STORY

By Rev. Dr. Neddy Astudillo

“Sing for joy, you heavens, for the LORD has done this; shout aloud, you earth beneath. Burst into song, you mountains, you forests and all your trees, for the LORD has redeemed Jacob, he displays his glory in Israel.” (Isaiah 44:23, NIV)

Throughout the entire Scripture, nature is included in people’s celebrations of the goodness of God, and the fidelity of the human being is often expressed in beatitudes for creation (Mk 16:15). When humans are disobedient, nature suffers accordingly (Jer 3: 2-3, Rev 11: 15-18). If God forgives, vindicates and blesses the people, the earth heals and greens, and the good news is shared also with her (Joel 2: 18-27).

By the will of the Creator, nature and humanity are united in a common history that cannot be undone and that turns sour when humans sin. The apostle Paul expresses it as a slavery to futility, from which nature and humanity both will one day be liberated. But nature lives conscious of this slavery and for that reason groans and waits anxiously for the manifestation of the sons and daughters of God:

“For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now.” (Rom 8: 19-22, NRSV)

Solidarity with the tropical forests

There is no doubt that the deterioration of tropical forests—which produces violence against indigenous peoples, destroys animal species, and threatens the climatic stability, and therefore the livability, of the planet—is the product of sin.

Our hope in a glorious liberation in heaven cannot close our ears to the clamor of the tropical forests of the earth. We do not know the day or the hour in which the glory of God will become manifest (Mk 13:32), but we can still write a new story, inspired by those we find in Scripture. There we see moments when the earth loses its harmony, and moments when God restores it as people repent. Today we can also write a story of recovery because the earth still holds the wisdom with which God created her (Prov 8). The tropical forests, and the creatures and populations that depend on it, can still receive good news.

The stewardship of creation continues to be part of our history while living on Earth. Genesis 1 and 2 provide a guide to how we might live on the planet. While God willed for humankind to have dominion over the animals of the earth (Gen 1:26), we are also called to be good stewards, to place boundaries around that power. Caring and serving are useful values for our present context. Even as we use natural resources in daily life, the Earth is still God’s (Ps 24: 1a), and it fully expects to enjoy the good news of Christ (Jn 3:16). These principles of our Christian faith set a series of ethical guidelines to orient our life today, including governing our response to the climate and environmental crises, when either knocks on the doors of our churches asking for help.

A similar story that serves as example

Recall the story of Joseph, the son of Jacob, and the dreams of the pharaoh of Egypt (Gen 37, 40-41). While the story does not speak of an environmental crisis caused by human sin, it does say that the region will experience seven years of favorable climate that will create great abundance, and seven years of conditions that will create famine, unless people store reserves. Like the pharaoh's dreams, climate scientists today announce stronger storms, longer droughts, and floods that will put the lives of the most vulnerable peoples at risk. In the story of Joseph we see the sensitivity of a leader who takes seriously the revelation of his dreams and uses his power to do what is necessary to avoid a human crisis. Pharaoh did not have the same faith as Joseph, but he understood that behind the interpretation of his dream lies the goodness and truth that can help him to succeed as a pharaoh. For his part, Joseph, sustained in his faith, has learned that his gift is infused with mission: to help others, regardless of their faith, and without regard for his own fate. He decides to share his gift. Pharaoh frees Joseph, declares him governor of all Egypt, and places him in charge of administering the resources that will be vital to save the lives of the people under his care, and of those who will come to him from other nations, asking for help.

The reality that looms in this case is not a situation caused by sin. It comes from God, God knows it, and God chooses not to avoid it. But this does not mean that God does not care about the suffering of the people. God provides the people with the necessary knowledge to avoid suffering, through dreams, which are spiritual gifts of interpretation. God moves hearts and wills, so that God's goodness and glory may be known throughout the earth, even during a time of crisis. Human sin did not cause the crisis that produced scarcity, but sin could have turned scarcity into a great tragedy, had the land not been able to count on faithful leaders, people of faith, peasants, stockers, workers—along with the benefits of God's creation—to provide abundantly for all.

It is also our story

Time is not on our side, say climate scientists, who noted in 2018 that we have less than twelve years to reverse the path of the climate crisis and prevent the likely death of millions of people. Earth's tropical forests are an often-overlooked tool for fighting climate change. They have the capacity to provide more than one-third of the total CO₂ reductions required to keep temperatures at a safe level. Without tropical forests, the planet threatens to become a hostile land, without the capacity to recover for thousands of years. Human beings have never lived on Earth with the temperatures and weather patterns that scientists fear will be unleashed if the warming continues on its current path. As in ancient Egypt, those who suffer most will be the vulnerable, impoverished communities, who have no other choice but to face the storms, droughts, and other impacts, or migrate to seek help, in hope of finding it. We owe it to them, our neighbors, to offer help. The solutions are still in our hands, and they require cooperation among the entities responsible for the care and protection of tropical forests: indigenous peoples, peasants, government authorities, voters, scientists and environmentalists, churches, religious people, and faith leaders. All of us have a role to play in this new story.

God has given us gifts for the good of the entire community. If God cannot change the reality of climate change, God has given us moral authority to stop deforestation, and violence against forest protectors. God has also given us knowledge to teach each other how to care for the natural world, and the Spirit to fall in love with it. By doing so, we might free ourselves from the stories of oppression and injustice of which we have been a part for centuries. We might give thanks for the place we live in and the faith we have, and we might witness the Glory of God manifesting in all of God's Creation. (Ps 33:5)

“This is not a matter of evangelization, but of survival of the planet” Rev. Edgar Castaño, Colombia

TALKING POINTS

1. **Rainforest destruction and sin.** There is no doubt that the deterioration of tropical forests—which produces violence against indigenous peoples, destroys animal species, and threatens the climatic stability, and therefore the livability, of the planet—is the product of sin.
2. **The call to be good stewards.** While God willed for humankind to have dominion over the animals of the earth (Gen 1:26), we are also called to be good stewards, to place boundaries around that power. Caring and serving are useful values for our present context. Even as we use natural resources in daily life, the Earth is still God's (Ps 24: 1a), and it fully expects to enjoy the good news of Christ (Jn 3:16).
3. **Recall the story of Joseph.**
 - a. Recall the story of Joseph, the son of Jacob, and the dreams of the pharaoh of Egypt (Gen 37, 40-41). Like the pharaoh's dreams, climate scientists today announce stronger storms, longer droughts, and floods that will put the lives of the most vulnerable peoples at risk.
 - b. The reality of scarcity on Joseph's story is not a situation caused by sin. It comes from God, God knows it, and God chooses not to avoid it. But this does not mean that God does not care about the suffering of the people. God provides the people with the necessary knowledge to avoid suffering, through dreams, and spiritual gifts of interpretation. God moves hearts and wills, so that God's goodness and glory may be known throughout the earth, even during a time of crisis.
 - c. Human sin did not cause the crisis that produced the scarcity we find in the story of Joseph (Gen 37, 40-41), but sin could have turned scarcity into a great tragedy, had the land not been able to count on faithful leaders, people of faith, peasants, stockers, workers—along with the benefits of God's creation--to provide abundantly for all.
4. **Tropical forests as a tool to fight climate change.**
 - a. Earth's tropical forests are an often-overlooked tool for fighting climate change. They have the capacity to provide more than one-third of the total CO2 reductions required to keep temperatures at a safe level. Without tropical forests, the planet threatens to become a hostile land, without the capacity to recover for thousands of years.
 - b. Human beings have never lived on Earth with the temperatures and weather patterns that scientists fear will be unleashed if the warming continues on its current path. As in ancient Egypt, those who suffer most will be the vulnerable, impoverished communities, who have no other choice but to face the storms, droughts, and other impacts, or migrate to seek help in hope of finding it. We owe it to them, our neighbors, to offer help.
5. **God has given us what we need to stop deforestation.** God has given us gifts for the good of the entire community. If God cannot change the reality of climate change, God has given us moral authority to stop deforestation, and violence against forest protectors. God has also given us knowledge to teach each other how to care for the natural world, and the Spirit to fall in love with it.

PRAYERS AND MEDITATIONS

PRAYING FROM THE FORESTS

At the feet of forest trees, I pray, while I meditate,
We have to save the forests!
I lay my prayers on them,
That they might rise to the sky with the early haze.

At the foot of the woods, I thank you Creator God,
Because here I feel alive.

In the forest nothing dies, everything resurrects.
In the forest the air is clean, and the season is cool.
In the forest life praises you noisily,
and I am inspired.

I pray while I meditate,
We have to save the forests!
In the midst of your creation I feel that I am alive.
Let's keep going! for there is no way longer than the one that does not begin,
Where you never arrive because you never start.

INTERCESSORY PRAYER

God of creation, we come faithfully responding to your call,
 To love our neighbor and choose life,
 to share your good news with all creation.
May the wisdom of the earth and the words that will be spoken
 Speak truth to our hearts, tenderly, so we may hear you.
Help us find new paths to feel the unbroken wholeness for which we yearn
 To see the world as you see it, to keep your creation sacred.
When the earth groans and our fear rises, help us see your Spirit at work,
 So we may stand in solidarity with all you love.
In Jesus' name we pray together,
 Amen.

Even in the midst of firewood and fire lashing
against it,
Of alluvions passing and acid memories,
The forest keeps in her emotions
dreams of full life,
of moss on stone, morning dew,
Lulled with the song of the birds.

While in her deep thinking,
And heart, a fertile brook may be found,
I will pray for forests, and
beg you to assist me, dear God,
in this mission of peace and life.

CALL TO WORSHIP

Spirit of Life

Come and fill us with your love and with your grace.

Spirit of Consolation

Come and embrace us with your presence and vision.

Spirit of Hope

Come and instruct us with your liberating Word, to serve you cheerfully.

Spirit of Community

Come and convert us to each other, without fear, indifference or divisions.

Spirit of Grace

Come and receive us in the New Earth that you are creating.

Spirit of Creation

Come and move us to the sound of your groaning. Amen.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

For those who suffer the effects of deforestation, contaminated soils and water,
for the violence against those who protect forests...

We ask that they may find healing, solidarity, justice and hope.

For the wild animals, populations, and all of nature threatened by the climate crisis,

We ask that they be freed of the indifference,
their lives protected, so they might enjoy the promises of their Creator.

For our bodies, temples of the One God, for our vain desires and habits of consumption,

We ask for good pleasures that build and sustain life for all generations.

For those who make laws and those who put them into practice,
for the scientific community and their actions for the good of all people,

May your Wisdom guide them, the fear of Jehovah fill them,
and the sacredness of life summon them to act justly.

For all this and so much more, May God's Kingdom Come!

Come, Holy Spirit, renew all creation, bodies, souls, desires.

May we find our place on Earth.

Forgive us and guide us, we ask you, Lord. Amen

ASSURANCE OF PARDON

Like the tree that generously offers its branches for the nest of birds, and the sun that rises faithfully every morning, so is God's love for us. To serve, to love and to live we have been forgiven. Let us give thanks to God, and let us not forget God's teachings. Amen.

LESSON PLAN

READING THE BIBLE WITH ECO-THEOLOGICAL LENSES

By Rev. Dr. Neddy Astudillo

Below you will find a series of Scriptural passages that will provide you with a theological foundation to inspire the environmental ministry of your church. This Lesson Plan is not meant to be a Bible Study, but it could provide you with content to create one of your own. This is also not a hermeneutical exercise. We are selecting Scriptural passages from different books of the Bible that may provide new insights, values and wisdom about the role of humanity in relationship to nature, and about God's relationship with Creation.

We recommend using this resource with small groups, to encourage richer dialogue. If you have a large group, divide people into groups of 5.

By the time people gather for this exercise, the facilitator and participants should have a basic understanding of some of the most crucial challenges that tropical forests and indigenous peoples, as guardians of tropical forests, are facing today. The Interfaith Rainforest Initiative has produced three Issue Primers that will provide you with key facts on these topics. The facilitator should read the documents in full prior to facilitating the workshop and share the key facts from each document with his/her group.

Explain to your group that these key facts are the reason you are now approaching Scripture and seeking guidance from God. How is the Church to respond before such a reality?

What does Scripture say about our call to care for the Earth and the most vulnerable people?

What is God's will for God's creation?

From these passages, what wisdom can we harvest about our way of life? What values from Scripture are needed today to support the protection of tropical forests and the rights of indigenous peoples?

You can write the key facts in a place people can see them, photocopy them for each group, or read them aloud before dividing people into smaller groups for the biblical exercise.

Your group will also need to have at hand the Scriptural passages, the introductions, and guiding questions for each set of passages. Include the Opening and Closing prayers for fuller participation.

Materials:

1. Bibles (at least one for each small group)
2. PowerPoint or photocopies with: Key facts, opening and closing prayers, Scriptural passages with their introduction, and guiding questions.
3. Key facts on Tropical Forests, Climate Change and Indigenous Peoples (found in the IRI Issue Primers and the IRI Resource Guide)

Opening Prayer

(Adapted from: “Estamos a Tempo, Guia Educativa Justicia Climática y Agua, para Iglesias y Organismos Ecueménicos y Sociales, AIPRAL, Editora Pendão Real, San Pablo, Brasil, 2016; pg. 65)

Note to facilitator: Depending on your group, you may want to follow the prayer with a song, personal introductions, a testimonial, ice breakers, etc.

How many things you provide us, Lord, when making this world ... You thought about every detail, every color, every texture, every shape, every sound, every taste, every experience.

You created incomparable beauties, places that fill us with wonder and awe: lakes, rivers, mountains, beaches, fields, ice, forests. All your creation sings of harmony and speaks to us of life.

Yes, you created everything to allow us to live, with nothing left over, and without anything missing. You did everything so that we could live the life you gave us.

May we never forget, Lord, that this world is yours, only yours, and that the life we have is a gift of your grace that we should appreciate, be grateful for, and share. In Christ’s name we pray. Amen.

Preparing to work in small groups (5 minutes)

Note to Facilitator: Before people break into smaller groups of no more than five and read the scriptural passages, we give them a chance to connect with their personal stories related to climate change, tropical forests, deforestation. Ask participants to take a minute in silence and think about this question. Then ask them to share their story with the person closest to them. Keep track of time. Tell people when a minute has passed, and when it is time to let the other person share. Give everyone one minute to think, and one minute to share.

Question: When you think about tropical forests and/or climate change, what memory comes to mind?

Reading Scripture with the Earth in Mind

Note to facilitator: The extra passages added to each section can be used at another time. Tell participants that those resources are for study at home. Divide participants into smaller groups of no more than five people.

1. Genesis 2:15-23, Psalm 8, Matthew 6:25-34. (15 minutes)

Other possible passages: Gen 1: 26-2:4; Gen 9: 8-17, Lev 25:1-7, Lk 22: 25-27; Rev 21: 1-4

Note to facilitator: Ask three volunteers to locate and read one of the three passages. Prior to reading the three passages, read the introduction and guiding questions below to your small group. Select a notetaker to make notes of the answers to the guiding questions, for sharing later with the larger group.

Introduction: These passages inform the Christian eco-theology of Stewardship. They help us talk about the role of human beings in relationship with nature, and the limits of dominion. Stewardship as theology in practice inspires people to work in conservation efforts and to raise awareness about our call to care for the natural world, as an act of faith in God.

Guiding questions:

- a. If God’s covenant was not only with Noah but with every living creature, how might that affect or limit our capacity to dominate the earth?

- b. If humanity was made in God's image, how are we to relate to the natural world? How does God relate to the Earth based on these passages?
- c. Looking at the problem of deforestation, the destruction of wildlife, and violence against forest keepers, how are we not behaving as God behaves? How can we better exercise our Stewardship of God's creation? Think in practical terms.

2. Hos 4: 1-7, Joel 2:18-27, Rev 11:15-18. (15 minutes)

Other possible passages: Isa 11: 6-9; Isa 55: 10-13; Isa 65:17-25; Ps 24: 1-2; Mk 16:15; Rom 8:19-23

Note to facilitator: Select three readers. Prior to reading the three passages, ask your small group to think about this question: What aspect of creation is most precious to you? Think of a place or a creature you feel most at peace with. Recall an experience of connection between you and the place or the creature. Give each other a minute (no more) to share in the small group.

After everyone has shared, read the introduction and guiding questions. Ask notetakers to make note of the answers to share later with the larger group.

Introduction: According to these passages, nature and humanity are united in a common history that cannot be undone, a history that turns sour when humans sin. The apostle Paul expresses it as a slavery to futility, from which nature and humanity will one day be liberated. But Nature lives conscious of this slavery and for that reason groans and waits anxiously for the manifestation of the sons and daughters of God. This is the vision of environmental justice (eco-justice). As an eco-theology, eco-justice recognizes that the search for human well-being must always incorporate nature's, as a living being with rights and feelings. Eco-justice theology in practice inspires efforts like fair trade, nuclear disarmament, ending environmental racism, indigenous rights to land and self-determination, and interdisciplinary and ecumenical efforts, among many others.

Guiding questions:

- a. The vision of the biblical prophets recognizes a link between humans and nature. The well-being of each is an expression of God's blessing and will. Looking at the issue of tropical forests, envision what God may be saying today to those responsible for the deforestation, the pollution of waters, and the disappearance of animal species. Write these down.
- b. What might God be saying to the guardians of forests who suffer persecution, to the forest creatures? Write down your responses.
- c. What might God be saying to the church, those who live near tropical forests, and those who live in cities? Write down your answers. Imagine a scenario, and if time allows, create a dialogue, a psalm, a poem, or a litany prayer.

3. Isa 65:17-25; Job 12: 7-11; Ps 147; Eccles 3: 17-22 (12 minutes)

Other possible passages: Gen 2: 7, 18-19; Ex 3: 1-6, 19: 16-19; Num 22: 23-30; 1 Kings 17: 2-6; Prov 6: 6-8; Prov 8: 22-36; Job 34: 14-15; Job 12: 7-11; Lk 3: 21-22; 1 Col 1:15-20; Rev 5: 11-14

Note to facilitator: Ask for four readers. Prior to reading the four passages, ask the following question: Do you recall ever having a spiritual experience outdoors? What happened? How did it lead you to connect with and to praise God?

Most people have never been asked this before. Give participants a minute to think about their answer, and a minute to share with the rest of the small group. When everyone has shared, read the introduction and guiding questions. Ask notetakers to make note of the answers to share later with the larger group.

Introduction: Eco-spirituality is a theology that places human beings on par with the rest of God's creatures. Nature is sister, a partner in ministry. The harmony of creation is an ethical value through which people should order their relationships with everything created. The Holy Spirit, breath of life, is a universal experience, manifesting the presence of God in a multiplicity of ways, connecting all people and creatures with God, throughout history. Eco-spirituality as theology in practice is helpful to those who want to work on environmental issues at a multi-faith, intercultural level, including with indigenous peoples.

Guiding questions:

- a. What do these passages say about human beings, nature and Godself? What environmental values do you perceive inform these statements of faith?
- b. In what way do these biblical values resemble your culture's values, and those of indigenous peoples?
- c. Do these biblical statements of faith provide guidance on how to understand our role as human beings, the role of nature in creation, and God's relationship with all? How might this be helpful in the way we talk about the importance of caring for tropical forests in our churches?

Plenary (15 minutes)

Note to facilitator: Bring your large group back together and ask the notetakers of each small group the following questions. Once they have answered, allow other members of small groups to add their own thoughts, to fill any gaps in the notetaker's summary. At the end of this exercise, invite your audience to read at home the remaining passages, and continue reflecting on how these eco-theologies might be helpful in supporting their engagement in protecting rainforests with other people in their community.

- What wisdom can we harvest from these passages about our way of life and the values needed today to support the protection of tropical forests and the rights of indigenous peoples?
- Which eco-theology did you find most useful for your church context: Stewardship, Eco-Justice, or Eco-Spirituality?
- What was the most interesting discovery reading these passages?
- What do you feel we should do next?

Note to facilitator: People might want to gather again and read the remaining scriptural passages, asking themselves different questions, or create liturgies, prayers, or litanies based on the reflection of each group.

Closing Prayer

Dear Lord,

Today we opened our hearts to hear your voice, and we sought your guidance to respond to the plea of your creation;

We heard about violence against forests and forest guardians, threats against wildlife and humans across the world caused by the climate crisis.

Above all things, we trust in your steadfastness, dear Lord.

We believe there is nothing in heaven and on earth that could ever separate us from your love.

Supported by your love, we want to respond to the groaning of your creation. Our neighbors, our sisters and brothers, summon us, to find answers to the aches of the world. After all, you asked us to be good stewards of your creation.

Be patient dear Lord and come to our rescue!

While we wait for your promises, guide us to be in just relationship with your beloved creation, peoples, wildlife, and forests, so they can also, as we do, praise you and be glad.

“Let the heavens rejoice, let the earth be glad; let the sea resound, and all that is in it.

Let the fields be jubilant, and everything in them; let all the trees of the forest sing for joy!”
(Ps 96:11-12 NRSV)

In Christ Jesus, our Lord, we pray and say, Amen!



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