A Season of Creation: United Methodist Resources for September 2015 based on the Revised Common Lectionary

A Season of Creation is an opportunity to spend the month of September focused on creation-centered themes. Begun in Australia nearly two decades ago, this initiative has spread worldwide and generated substantial resourcing, some of which is captured on the website, http://seasonofcreation.com.

However, as you may note by reviewing these resources, they are not based on the Revised Common Lectionary, and they do not always follow the Basic Pattern that United Methodists and many other ecumenically committed churches tend to use.

So here, for our use, is an organization of the themes of A Season of Creation based on the Revised Common Lectionary readings for each Sunday, plus additional suggestions for music from several United Methodist resources, along with ideas for visuals, media, prayers, planning, preaching and Great Thanksgivings.

A Season of Creation: Purpose
The overarching purpose of A Season of Creation is to enable Christians to offer their worship to God in a more “creation-connected” way than we might during other times and seasons of the Christian year.

The logic of this focused time is much the same as any other “established” season of the Christian year. For example, we focus on the suffering and death of Jesus during Holy Week, and on his second coming during Advent. We focus on these things intently at these times with the hope that such focus may come to infuse our whole way of life as the body of Christ in the world year-round.

So it is with the Season of Creation. By spending time each year in a more focused way on God’s many gifts in creation, we are not seeking to compartmentalize creation to just a few weeks a year, but rather deepen our appreciation for creation as an integral part of our
worship and discipleship throughout the year and throughout our lives.

Using the Lectionary

The use of the lectionary during this series is a bit different than in other seasons. The scripture readings for each Sunday that follow below are “extracts” from the lectionary readings that seem best to support the theme for each week. The lectionary at this point of the year (Season after Pentecost) generally designed for semi-continuous readings, and there are actually no intended connections between the readings. However, for this “Season of Creation” we are “pulling out” parts of the texts across each week’s selections that have some connection with the theme for the day. Generally speaking, such “selective reading” is not recommended, nor is it part of the design of the lectionary. We make an exception to that general rule in order to celebrate this season while still drawing on the lectionary texts for each week.

What A Season of Creation Isn’t... And Is

A Season of Creation is not about worshipping the created world. Nor should these weeks be seen primarily as an opportunity for social activism or messaging of one form or another regarding “ecological issues.” The first is idolatry—worshipping the creature rather than the Creator. The second is not even idolatry because it is not even worship. It is perhaps merely a form of persuasive drama.

Instead, this season is a call for us to spend considerable focused time as the body of Christ blessing the Triune Creator for the many gifts of creation, listening for the Spirit’s encouragement toward stewardship and our failures as stewards of these good gifts. In each service and across the whole series, we seek to reaffirm our relationship to God as God’s creatures, completely dependent on God and the whole of God’s creation for our lives here and now as foretaste of the fulfillment we groan for inwardly in the promised New Creation.

It’s a bit hard to reaffirm our creaturehood or our connection with creation if our worship is entirely indoors. So at some points in this series, and especially for the final week, if not every week, consider worshipping outdoors. And when you do need to worship indoors, find as many ways as you can to “bring the outside in.” The brief video “This Is Your Brain on Worship” may help you and your worship planning team consider ways you may do this where you are.

The Feel of the Series

Keep in mind that because the theme of each of these services differs from week to week, the feel of the individual services may change as well. Some services will be more contemplative, while others may move toward more expressive praise.

Since the feel from one week to the next may be so different, it will be important, for the sake of the series feeling like a series, to maintain some common elements across the weeks.
Some of these repeated elements might be musical. For example, you might begin each service with the first verse or the at least the melody of “Creation Sings” (Worship & Song 3018), and maybe introduce the prayers or interweave them with the singing of the second verse.

Others might be artistic. Consider prominently displaying an “anchor image” that unites all five Sundays of the entire series. This may be an image of the earth, or some aspect of the natural world. It doesn’t have to be exactly the same image each week. It doesn’t even need to be in exactly the same place. But it should be recognizably the same thing, even if its particular form or location is varied a bit week by week to fit the feel of each week’s service.

Consider, too, repeating a basic ritual action. Celebrate Holy Communion each week using the same basic Great Thanksgiving with “additions” that fit the theme for each week, or at least celebrate Holy Communion each week. If you choose the former, you may want to use Word and Table II (UMH 12-15) as the underlying repeated prayer, adding appropriate thematic words at the asterisks (on pp. 13-14). Or you may want to invite persons to touch the water in the font each week as they enter and are sent from worship as a reminder of our connection with the gift of water and the Holy Spirit in baptism.

Finally, some repeated actions might be kinetic. Perhaps each week’s service might begin with raising hands in blessing, later involve inviting all who can to kneel in confession and contrition, and end with a call for worshipers to “march out” with the determined step of those who are prepared to live as Christ’s body, redeemed by his blood, with gratitude for and partnership with all of God’s gifts in creation.

Repeated music, art, ritual and movement across a series create a subtle and powerful set of links from one week to the next that give the whole series coherence in the minds and bodies of worshipers. That basic sense of coherence will help worshipers make more links across these four weeks themselves and may open them to making links beyond worship into daily life.

**The Four Weeks: Themes, Scriptures, and Suggestions for Visuals, Music and Media**

**Mountains and Valleys Sunday (9/6)**

*Art and media*: Commission and display images of mountains and valleys in a variety of terrains and climates (desert, jungle, forest, snow-covered, etc.) if possible, being sure to include images of either that may be near you. Be sure to ask any photographers you have in your congregation or wider community for their contributions.

Also consider collecting and showing several “flyover videos” of mountains and valleys. You might do this as a visual prelude to worship, or part of the sermon, or even during the distribution of communion. Here are some possibilities online:


Sierra Nevada Mountain Range: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1xUXGYZbmhQ&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1xUXGYZbmhQ&feature=related)

Mountain flyover: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Eom4FosGv4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Eom4FosGv4)

*Not free*: Mountain View Worship Background Video: [http://www.worshipvue.com/media/video/mountain_flyover_long_play](http://www.worshipvue.com/media/video/mountain_flyover_long_play)


*Music*: Consider two songs to enwrap the readings today, as follows:

*As an act of praise during the entrance*
Mountains Are All Aglow (UMH 86) Verse 1
Psalm 125:1-2
Mountains Are All Aglow, Verse 1

*Around the readings proper:*
God of Great and God of Small (W&S 3033) Verse 1
Proverbs 21:1-2
God of Great and God of Small, Verse 2
James 2:8-9
God of Great and God of Small, Verses 3-4

*The Prayers*: Use the TFWS 2201 or UMH 877 with the sung responses on UMH 485 as the pattern for intercessions. Be sure to add these two intercessions: “Together, let us pray for the earth, for all that lives and moves and rests upon it, and for the wisdom and the will to be good stewards of its many gifts” and “Together, let us pray for the forgiveness of our sins.” Conclude the prayers with silence and a word of pardon. Then sing together verse 2 of “Creation Sings” (W&S 3018) and share the peace of Christ with one another. If you use the complete version of An Appalachian Lord’s Supper (linked below), you may omit the prayer for forgiveness, the act of pardon and the sharing of peace and proceed directly to the invitation to the table in that prayer.

The Great Thanksgiving: Word and Table II, with the addition of the “*propers*” for Festival of God’s Creation or, if this fits your setting, An Appalachian Lord’s Supper.

*Thoughts on the theme*: Today we consider not only the gifts of mountains and valleys as part of the created order (Psalm), but also the ways we have distorted the gifts of each. We have done so literally, through such destructive processes as mountaintop removal for coal
mining that leads to massive erosion and water pollution in the valleys below. We have also done so metaphorically in how we see and treat others—arrogating the rich (the “high”) above the poor (“the lowly”). The video suggestions give visual witness to some of what Mountaintop removal does to the land. The Appalachian Lord’s Supper includes prayer for the Holy Spirit to breathe new life into “scarred hilltops, black water, wounded earth.”

Sky Sunday (9/13)

Arts and media—Skies and clouds of all types—day, night, dawn, sunset, day storms, night storms (with lightning), snowy skies, foggy skies, skies during eclipse, starry skies, moon in many phases, aurora.

Consider the ambient lighting where you worship—and how well you can control it. If you can make the space reasonably dark and fairly bright, consider starting worship with an evening or night feel, moving through darkest, starriest night to daybreak, and then from daybreak to twilight at the sending, following the biblical and ancient near eastern understanding of the day beginning at sundown. And if you have a way to project to the walls and ceilings, consider projecting a night sky with moon and the stars as atmospheric surroundings during the reading of the word and the preaching, moving toward a dawn feeling (with images of sunrise surrounding you) during the prayers, full sun at during the Great Thanksgiving, then moving the lighting through the course of the day during receiving at communion, toward late afternoon in the hymn of sending, and to twilight again at the final word of sending or benediction.

NASA’s Visible Earth website may be an excellent resource for images, many of which will be in the public domain. You may wish to check Wikimedia Commons for others that are either in the public domain or licensed for shared use.


Music:
For transition from twilight (evening) to night, consider Eric Whitacre’s Virtual Choir performance of Water Night, or surrounding the praying of Psalm 119:1-6 with the hymn “The Spacious Firmament on High” (Tune: Haydn, Text: Addison).

As a response to the sermon, consider singing “God of the Bible” (Worship & Song 3020), Verses 1-2.

Prayers: Continue using the intercessions you started with last week, replacing the intercession for the earth with “For the gift of the skies—rain, snow, light, air, protection, winds, and window to the universe—that we may be truly grateful and wise stewards of all these gifts, let us pray to the Lord.” Sing “Father, We Praise Thee” (UMH 680) as musical frame for the intercessions, as follows:

Sing “Father, We Praise Thee” Verse 1
Intercessions for the world, its peoples and its leaders, the church universal, and the skies
Sing: “Father, We Praise Thee” Verse 2
Intercessions for the people of the congregation, the sick, the suffering, the concerns of the local community, and the communion of saints
Sing: “Father, We Praise Thee” Verse 3
Then move into the Invitation to the Table, Confession, Pardon, Peace, Offering and Great Thanksgiving.

**Great Thanksgiving:** “A Great Thanksgiving for Transfiguration Sunday” includes images of brilliant light. This newer **Great Thanksgiving for Festival of God’s Creation** has a more “cosmic” feel. If you use the latter, be sure to add an Invitation to the Table, confession, pardon and peace. The intercessions are already built into this prayer, so you need not do them earlier.

**Thoughts on the Theme:**

By day, the sky diffuses solar light.

By night, the sky offers a window on the galaxy, and, with the aid of other instruments, the wider universe.

By day or by night, the sky helps to regulate the balances of water and CO2 on the planet, and the magnetosphere protects earth’s life from much of the harmful radiation of the sun.

Sky is also where we sense at once hope for rescue (Christ returning with the clouds) and menace (storms, aerial attack).

Sky in the Bible is also seen as “the firmament”—a “dome” keeping “the waters above the earth” from falling on the earth all at once and destroying all life in the deluge.

Sky is where many cultures, including biblical cultures, have pictured “God” to be. This is why in biblical sacrifices, the highlight of the sacrifice is when the largest billows of smoke rise from that altar to the sky.

And sky is both a means of transport and an erstwhile home for billions of creatures ("the billion bug highway")

**Humanity Sunday (9/20)**

Arts: As people enter the worship space, fill screens or walls with images of humans in every shape, size, form, and culture in classic art, photography, and new art commissioned from your congregation or community. Today we give thanks to God for human beings in all times and places.

Media: One of the “Playing for Change” videos, such as “Stand by Me”—As call to worship, prelude or response to sermon or prayers, or as communion anthem [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Us-TVg40ExM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Us-TVg40ExM)


Music: Think global this week. Sing what your congregational culture knows, but be sure learn and sing at least two pieces from cultures very different from your own, even if in English. United Methodist resources for global music include The Upper Room Worshipbook, The Global Praise Series from GBGM-Musik, The United Methodist Hymnal, The Faith We Sing, and Worship & Song, not to mention the whole of Mil Voces para Celebrar (Spanish UM Hymnal) and Come, Let Us Worship (Korean-English UM Hymnal). Particularly consider
singing “There’s No One in This Work Like Jesus” (Worship & Song 3036) before and after the reading of the gospel.

**Prayers:** Wrap the intercessions this week with “God of the Bible.” Sing Verse 3 before beginning the prayers, and sing verses 4-5 to conclude them. Then move into Invitation to the Table, Confession, Pardon, Peace, Offering and Great Thanksgiving.

**Great Thanksgiving:** Consider **The Great Thanksgiving for World Communion Sunday** or **Holy Communion from General Conference Day 5.** The latter includes a form of intercession wrapped with the song from Zimbabwe, “If You Believe and I Believe” (Worship & Song, 3121).

**Thoughts on the texts:**

God saw all that God had made and said, “Tov meod!” “Very good!”

The scriptures for this week are rich with descriptions of the amazing competence and at the same time sinfulness and foolishness of the human species.

We are conversionists, we humans—constantly converting one thing into another toward human and sometimes also larger ecological thriving.

But we are not entirely converted by God’s love and wisdom ourselves—especially when it comes to our self-centeredness. Self-preservation is a virtue to a degree, but the failure to recognize the proper limits of our self-interest can drive us to the most dunderheaded and destructive of behaviors.

On this Humanity Sunday, we celebrate and seek God’s Spirit to empower the virtue of human wisdom—wisdom in mutuality of relationships (Proverbs), wisdom in meditating on God (Psalm 1), wisdom in building community (James), and wisdom in self-release as leadership (Mark).

**Blessing All Living Creatures Sunday (9/27)**

**Arts and Media:** This is a service for the blessing of all kinds of creatures—plant and animal alike. The creatures brought to this blessing, and the people who bring them, are the only artwork necessary for this day. Some of these creatures may provide their own “media” to enhance the soundscape of this service. Those bringing plants and flowers for blessing have provided additional visuals.

If possible, worship outdoors today. If not, worship with the doors or windows open, or in a covered indoor-outdoor space.

**Music:** Open worship with a procession including choir/praise ensemble, clergy, other worship leaders and all who have brought creatures or photos or pictures of creatures with them while all sing either with “All Creatures of Our God and King” (UMH 62) or “All Things Bright and Beautiful” (UMH 147).

**Scriptures:** James 5:13-18, Mark 9:40-41

**Sermon:** Minimal! The one response you are inviting today is to join in blessing all of God’s
creatures. Reflect very briefly on how the prayers of the people described in James and acts of compassion for others as described in Mark are ministries of blessing for others we are all invited to participate in and offer on behalf of all who need them—humans, plants and animals alike.

The Blessing: Move from this very brief reflection after the readings directly into the Prayer for the Blessing of Plants and Animals (see United Methodist Book of Worship, 609-610). To the blessings listed there add this: “Blessed are you, O Lord of the Universe; you create the plants that give oxygen for all animals to breathe, food for many species, enrichment to the soil, and blessing to our souls by their beauty. // O God, how wonderful are the works of your hands.”

Depending on the size of the crowd that gathers for this service, you may find it helpful to have more than one “station” for individual blessing of the plants or animals. Long lines are to be avoided! There is nothing about this service that requires clergy to offer the individual blessings, so consider creating multiple stations hosted by either a clergy person or a lay person so each plant or animal (or photo!) brought may be blessed without rushing and without the blessing taking too long a time.

Be sure as well to have bowls of water available for animals that may be brought today. What Jesus said about a cup of cold water to disciples applies to disciples offering this basic hospitality to our animal guests today as well!

When the blessing is complete, move to the Invitation to the Table, Confession, Pardon, Offering and Great Thanksgiving.

Great Thanksgiving: “Holy Communion from General Conference 2012, Day 8” This form of the Great Thanksgiving may have several clergy (elder or local pastor) as presiders, or just one. Its advantage is its interactivity, something well-suited for the outdoor and perhaps more informal setting a service with a blessing of all creatures in the midst of it may require.

For a song of Sending, sing “All Things Bright and Beautiful,” whether for the first time in this service or as a reprise.