# Season of Creation Theme Service

# Awe before Creation

*by Ralph Carl Wushke*

## Suggestions for Visual Display

*(Suitable visual displays connected to the Matthew text and the Psalm images from the Call to Worship might be a reproduction of a picture of Earth taken from outer space (Psalm 19) juxtaposed with a nature scene or meadow, including images of flowers and birds or a depiction of St. Francis (Matthew 6). This can be a three-dimensional display if you have access to an “earth from space” ball and some potted living plants that could be decorated with reproductions of birds, hummingbirds, etc.)*

## Call to Worship

*(Excerpts of Psalm 19:1–2 and Matthew 6:24–33, NRSV)*

The heavens are telling the glory of God;   
and the firmament proclaims [God’s] handiwork.

**Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns,   
and yet your heavenly [Parent] feeds them.**

Day to day pours forth speech, and night declares knowledge.

**Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow;   
they neither toil nor spin,   
yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory   
was not clothed like one of these.**

But strive first for the kingdom of God,  
and [God’s] righteousness,   
and all these things will be given to you as well.

## Opening Prayer

Let us gather to call ourselves into mindfulness of the sacred gift of time: worship time and Sabbath time.

**O Spirit, you swept through the ages:   
be among us now   
to fill us with radical amazement at the wonder of creation and creativity.   
Call to us that we may hear your voice in beauty,   
in witness, in song, and in prayer,   
and respond with all that we have to offer:   
body, mind, soul, and spirit.   
Whisper to us when we doubt your goodness  
and despair of hope   
in a world fraught with signs of destruction,   
that we may yet hear your still small voice. Amen.**

## Hymn of Praise

“She Comes Sailing on the Wind” (*Voices United* 380)

## Children’s Moment

The goal is to instill a sense of awe and wonder based on the image of a tree. If possible, have an image of a tree from a banner or artwork or, better yet, invite children to model trees from clay or play dough. As the trees are being made, or as the children and leader reflect on the image of the tree, engage children in conversation about trees with questions like the following:

* Did you see any trees on your way to the service today? Do you have trees in your neighbourhood, farm, or town?
* How many ways can you imagine a tree being a friend?
* What is a tree good for on a hot sunny day? What is a tree good for in a playground? Is a tree alive? Where does its food come from?

In what ways are trees good for Earth? Explore the way trees and earth help each other: Earth provides rain and nutrients for the tree to grow, and the tree prevents the wind and rain from blowing or washing away the soil, its food. For birds and squirrels, a tree is a home. For animals and humans, trees provide food. For a carpenter, a tree might be lumber to build a home for people. For someone at camp, a tree is the source of warmth, light, heat, and inspiration in a campfire. When a tree dies and falls to the ground in a great forest, it slowly becomes home to many little bugs, worms, mushrooms, and microbes, which help to turn the tree back into soil, which in turn will provide food for another tree.

*Moment of prayer with children:* God, we thank you for trees; help us to see them in many ways and love them, as part of the wonder of all creation. Amen.

## Prayer of Confession

**Magnificent God,   
when we think of awe,  
our mind stumbles.  
We are too busy for awe.  
We know too much to be in awe.  
We are too jaded for awe.  
We ignore the spiritual gift of awe.  
We feel awe, yes, before a mountain,  
 a sparkling lake,  
 a hummingbird.  
We do not feel awe before the blessings of every day.   
 *(a moment for silent confession)*Forgive us, Magnificent One.  
Help us to experience awe this week  
 in washing dishes,  
 in the pesky backyard squirrel,  
 in our office colleagues and challenges,  
 in an evening stroll.  
For we would be deeply faithful to you. Amen.**

## Assurance of Pardon

Know that the ground of all being, from which all beauty, creation, and wisdom arise,   
is the ground of your being.   
Let your fears and anxious worries cease;   
turn and see the beauty and goodness from which you are formed,   
knowing that just to be, is a gift. Amen.

## Sermon Suggestions

*(scripture text: Matthew 6:25–34)*

In the context of a creation-themed service Matthew 6:25–34 (“the lilies of the field and the birds of the air”) offers a helpful lens to focus our thoughts. This is in part because of the sense of awe at creation it invokes, but also because it addresses another underlying concern: anxiety or worry. “And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?” Jesus asks (v. 27).

In an age of climate change and looming environmental apocalypse, paralyzing anxiety about the melting glaciers, rising sea levels, extinction of species, and the looming spectre of ecological refugees can fill our days. Fortunately for us, anxiety is one of the themes in Matthew 6. Abraham Joshua Heschel, noted Jewish philosopher of religion, loved trees and also popularized the term “radical amazement” in several books, including God in Search of Man (New York: Harper & Row, 1966 © 1955) and Man is Not Alone (New York: Octagon Books, 1972 © 1951). Herschel rightly intuited that real knowledge (especially Wisdom) births out of wonder, not doubt or fear.

Jesus’ words in Matthew 6 hold anxiety and awe in dynamic tension. Awe, wonder, and radical amazement are spiritual resources for Christians and others in a time of climate change. Guided by Jesus’ admonition and taking time for mindfulness in this Season of Creation, we can find inspiration and renewal for our daily lives, challenges, and solidarity. Celebrate the wonder of creation, for God’s sake and your own.

A sermon might explore radical amazement and awe in creation by lifting up traditional Aboriginal teachings and The United Church of Canada’s commitment to right relation. The United Church’s apology (1986) acknowledged that First Nations had long ago received from their Elders “an understanding of creation and of the Mystery that surrounds us all that was deep, and rich and to be treasured” (see [www.united-church.ca/beliefs/policies/1986/a651](http://www.united-church.ca/beliefs/policies/1986/a651)).

You might explore radical amazement as a starting point for ethical action insofar as much marginalization, racism, and war have fear of the “other” at their root. Awe and wonder at the rich human diversity and the human spirit in the children and adults of Palestine, Chiapas, the Philippines, and the Holocaust can be the seeds of ethics and activism.

A possible and somewhat surprising sermon conclusion might be a quote (in the public domain) from Charles Darwin, the concluding words from *On the Origin of Species*, and available online (see <http://Darwin-online.org.uk>): “There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed into a few forms or into one; and that, whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved.” (Chapter XIV, p. 490)

An abridged version of this quote concludes the 2009 movie about Charles and Emma Darwin *Creation*, directed by Jon Amiel.

## Hymn of Faith

“Wellspring of Wisdom” (*More Voices* 287)

## Prayer of Thanksgiving and Supplication

In a time of creation awareness we pause to give thanks for the wonders that surround us. We celebrate the blessings of Earth, nestled like a speck of dust in the great universe and at the same time home to life and beauty: from the amoeba to the antelope, from plankton to great whale, from newborn infant to wizened elder.

We lament the desecration of the sacred gifts: the impact we and our habits have on Earth and environment. We mourn the species now extinct from over hunting or loss of habitat. Move us to repent of our ways and live in harmony with Earth, our mother, and sun and moon, our sister and brother.

We give thanks for the breath of life, and pray that we may use our breath, our voices, and our lives to stand in solidarity with those places and peoples under threat or siege due to climate change or any other violence, which we name at this time… Strengthen us to keep solidarity.

Finally, we turn back to our own circles and community, rejoicing at the love of friends, family, and congregation and, at the same time, calling to mind all who cannot be in this circle today and those who are in any particular need, whom we name at this time…. Keep us in communion with the sick, the dying, and the bereaved.

Bless, O Holy One, our prayers and our intentions that they may be added to the mending of the world. Amen.

## Hymn of Departure

“O Beautiful Gaia” (*More Voices* 41)

## Commissioning for Mission

Go from this place,  
letting your anxious worries cease.   
May the lilies of the field and birds of the air   
inspire you to see God in all you do.

*or* “Seek Ye First the Kingdom,” Stanza 1 (*Voices United* 356)

## Benediction

May the blessing of Jesus, who announced God’s righteousness, of the Creator, who fills Earth with beauty, and of the Spirit, who nurtures awe, bless, inspire, and empower you. Amen.

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