Remember that God has given us these beautiful lands. But . . . none of this will mean anything unless we have a safe haven for these wilderness places. . . . Every one of us must pull our oar! Go out and spread the gospel!
— Steven Mather

One glorious autumn day a few years ago, in search of a secluded natural spot for spiritual reflection, I visited Great Falls Park on the Potomac River, just a few miles upstream from Washington, D.C. I found a perfect spot along a rocky ledge and sat there watching the sheets of water crash down the glorious falls, just lost in the beauty of it all.

My reverie was interrupted by the clattering sounds of a lovely young couple and a photographer, all dressed in “casual chic,” trying to negotiate the rocks with heels and dress shoes. I gathered from their conversation that they had come to the park to take some pre-wedding photos.

When the couple finally got settled and the photographer was about to snap the first picture, the bride-to-be suddenly looked up and said, “Oh honey, look! An eagle sent by God to bless our marriage.” I looked up, eager to share in this holy moment. What I saw, however, was not the characteristic white head and tail of an American Bald Eagle, but the black head and tail of the American Black Vulture.

Of course, I didn’t have the heart to tell the couple that their marriage had been “blessed” by a vulture. (And I do sometimes wonder how that couple is faring.) But I find myself often thinking of this moment – how in the middle of all the pre-wedding preparations, this bride took time to be attentive to God’s presence in that beautiful park. I think about the fact

Continued on page 12
Earth Ministry engages the religious community in environmental stewardship. We work in partnership with individuals and congregations to respond to this great moral challenge through education, modeling sustainable lifestyle choices, and organizing for social change through environmental advocacy.

Founded in 1992, Earth Ministry has a history of leading the way in caring for the environment from a faith perspective. Our Greening Congregations Program was the first in the country to help houses of worship implement sustainable practices, and our faithful advocacy program is on the cutting edge of empowering clergy and lay leaders to speak out on public policy issues.

Earth Ministry supports a growing network of congregations and has a national membership. While Earth Ministry is rooted in the Christian tradition, we actively engage all religious communities on climate and energy issues through Washington Interfaith Power & Light. Our programs and resources are available to all. www.earthministry.org   www.waipl.org

**FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR**

What is your favorite place in God’s creation?

That’s a hard question, isn’t it – there are so many choices, especially among our public lands. I’d say that of the national parks I’ve visited, Saguaro National Park in Arizona is my favorite. I also love Craters of the Moon National Monument in Idaho, Palouse Falls State Park and Glacier Peak Wilderness Area in Washington, and Lincoln Park right here in the city of Seattle.

And let’s not forget the Cape Hatteras National Seashore in North Carolina, Horicon National Wildlife Refuge in Wisconsin, Chugach National Forest in Alaska, the Jefferson Memorial in Washington, D.C., or the Lewis & Clark National Historic Trail spanning 11 states.

We are truly blessed in this country with wonderfully diverse lands held in the public trust. The intrinsic value and beauty of our nation’s lands have long been a matter of American pride and identity. Wilderness connects us with our religious heritage, serving as a place where many of us connect with the divine and have our deepest spiritual awakenings. We also enjoy the recreation opportunities that public lands have to offer, such as hiking, camping, fishing, boating, and viewing scenic wonders.

In the words of John Muir, “Everybody needs beauty as well as bread, places to play in and pray in, where nature may heal and give strength to body and soul.” Read on to fill your soul and learn how you can help protect the precious gift of our public lands.

Blessings,

[Signature]

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**Membership**

Join Earth Ministry/WAIPL and add your voice to the growing movement of people of faith caring for creation! Membership includes a subscription to Earth Letter.

**Individual Membership Levels:**
- $35 Individual
- $60 Family
- $100 Advocate
- $250 Steward
- $500 Sustainer
- $1000+ Sacred Circle

Join at www.earthministry.org or www.waipl.org, by phone at (206) 632-2426, or by sending in the enclosed envelope. Please contact us for congregational membership information.

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**Sarah Sullivan**
Record comments on proposed Longview coal export terminal

More than 165,000 public comments have been submitted as part of the environmental review process for the proposed coal export terminal in Longview, WA.

Thousands of people of faith testified at a hearing or submitted written comments opposing the Longview coal export terminal, citing health, environmental, and climate concerns. The 165,000 comments on the Longview terminal exceed the 125,000 comments agencies received on the proposed coal export terminal at Cherry Point earlier this year. Together we are making our voices heard!

Lummi Totem Pole Journey

This fall, Earth Ministry/Washington Interfaith Power & Light hosted an evening at Seattle University with Lummi tribal members announcing their upcoming Totem Pole Journey in opposition to coal export. Lummi leaders Jay Julius and Jewell James kept a crowd of 250 spellbound as they spoke from the heart about their tribe’s sacred lands and waters at risk from coal development.

Earth Ministry/WAIPL also supported the Totem Pole Journey itself, in which tribal members embarked on a 1700-mile journey of healing along the entire proposed coal train route. We organized a blessing of the Lummi totem pole at St. Leo Parish in Tacoma, WA, an inspiring event attended by 125 people of faith.

Speaking up for children’s health

Earth Ministry and the Washington State Nurses Association recently organized constituent meetings with US Senators Patty Murray and Maria Cantwell. These meetings brought together religious leaders and health professionals in support of strong federal legislation regarding toxic chemicals.

The group made specific requests for Senators Murray and Cantwell to strengthen the Chemical Safety Improvement Act. We stated our support for a national bill that won't pre-empt existing state laws that ban specific toxic chemicals, and asked that vulnerable populations such as children, the elderly, pregnant women, and people with disabilities are explicitly included. We also asked the Senators to support the Environmental Protection Agency in having regulatory authority to make determinations on chemicals of concern.
Deepening connections in Eastern Washington

Faith communities in the dry eastern half of Washington State have unique insights about preserving watersheds, agricultural lands, clean air, and safe chemicals.

Shalom United Church of Christ graciously hosted us for three community presentations on the risks of coal export in the Tri-Cities area. In Walla Walla, 25 religious leaders attended our conversation on coal. Later in the fall, members of multiple faith traditions gathered at Interfaith House in Pullman to share faith-based environmental stewardship practices and to delve into safe chemicals legislation. A wonderful bonus of that trip was a tour of a wheat farm in Ritzville by leaders of Zion Philadelphia Congregational UCC.

Earth Ministry’s Celebration of St. Francis

On October 3, 80 members attended Earth Ministry’s 19th Annual Celebration of St. Francis. The evening’s program, “Ecojustice, Social Justice, and the Christian Conscience,” featured Dr. Cynthia Moe-Lobeda, Associate Professor of Theological Ethics at Seattle University.

Dr. Moe-Lobeda addressed the Christian calling to resist structural evil by recognizing structural sin, as evidenced by environmental racism and climate imperialism. She eloquently articulated what it means to fight environmental oppression by building more sustainable and just alternatives, and to do so with love, hope, and moral power.

Churches, Clergy, & Congregations

Over the last several months, Earth Ministry/WAIPL met with or presented to United Churches of Olympia, Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship, Interfaith Coalition of Whatcom County, United Church in University Place, Newport Presbyterian Church in Bellevue, Harbor Covenant Church in Gig Harbor, Shalom United Church of Christ in Richland, Zion Philadelphia Congregational UCC in Ritzville, First Congregational Church UCC in Vancouver, St. Leo Parish in Tacoma, and Peace Lutheran Church, University of Washington Wesley Club, St. Mark’s Interfaith Group, and University Temple United Methodist Church in Seattle.

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Religious leaders meet with Congressman Reichert

A group of clergy and religious leaders living in the 8th Congressional District met with US Representative Dave Reichert on November 5. The meeting emphasized the spiritual value of wilderness for the faith community and expressed thanks for the Congressman’s longstanding dedication to public lands – especially his hard work in designating and expanding the Alpine Lakes Wilderness Area.

In explaining why people of faith value public lands, our religious leaders shared stories of laying down their emotional and spiritual burdens in the nearby Alpine Lakes Wilderness Area, participating in restoration projects that rely on the Land and Water Conservation Fund, and the importance of nature to young people in search of the Divine.

This Land is Our Land: Faithful Stewardship of Public Lands

Earth Ministry hosts regular gatherings to bring together church green teams, ecumenical partners, and friends to reflect on creation care issues. On October 26, a group of 27 faith leaders gathered at Fairwood Community United Methodist Church in Renton to kick off Earth Ministry’s public lands campaign.

As people of faith, many of us are spiritually nourished through our encounters of the divine in wilderness. Attendees at the event enjoyed an engaging presentation about the urgent call to protect wilderness and other public lands, and learned about the steps they and their faith communities can take to steward the lands God has entrusted to us. More about Earth Ministry’s work to protect public lands can be found throughout this issue of Earth Letter.

Environmental Protection Agency Listening Sessions

The US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) recently held 11 public listening sessions across the country to solicit input on standards for reducing carbon pollution from existing power plants.

US power plants emit approximately 2.3 billion tons of heat-trapping carbon dioxide pollution each year, 40% of total carbon pollution emitted in the United States.

Earth Ministry/WAIPL members turned out to listening sessions in Seattle, Denver, Chicago, and Washington, D.C., making the moral case for regulating carbon emissions directly tied to climate change. The feedback from these public listening sessions will play an important role in helping EPA develop common-sense guidelines supported by the majority of Americans.

Justice Leadership Program: Welcome, Karin!

Karin Frank joined Earth Ministry/WAIPL in September 2013 as part of the year-long United Church of Christ Justice Leadership Program. Karin is a lifelong Seattleite and University of Washington graduate and is excited to be back in the area. She is currently taking a break from her studies at Vanderbilt Divinity School and recently spent six months teaching in Bangladesh and traveling in Turkey.

Karin has already added a valuable Jewish perspective to our blog and newsletter and is looking forward to helping Washington Interfaith Power & Light develop and grow.
Witnessing God’s presence in all of creation is important for many of us as we wander along our faith journey. As Martin Luther once said, “God writes the gospel not in the Bible alone, but on trees and flowers and clouds and stars.”

There are times in which God’s message in the natural world may resonate more intimately than the written word. Personally, I am overwhelmed by the glory of God as I gaze upon wilderness at the end of a hike, study the masterpiece of a rainforest, or watch the sun set over the endless ocean. Experiences in nature have the power to sweep us away from our daily troubles and into the open arms of God. Often, this awe-inspiring comfort is exactly what we crave to fuel our faith journey.

The gift of God’s creation is magnificent, but we must not forget that “gift” is the key word. As with all gifts, it must be treated with care and respect. In Leviticus 25:23, God reminds us that we are the humble tenants of creation and that all rights of ownership belong eternally to the Creator. Our role is to be responsible managers of creation, so that the lands we use are cared for even as they provide us with recreational and spiritual nourishment. As we enjoy the bounty we have been given, we must remember that public lands are held in trust for God and the common good.

This understanding of land as a gift entrusted to us and as a reflection of God’s grace compels us to action. We must actively address those issues that threaten the health and viability of God’s land. It is all too easy to neglect or deny our role as stewards of the land in a society that participates in unsustainable levels of consumption, condones sacrificing wilderness to energy development, and is divided by disputes over land ownership.

The wisdom of the following Jewish folk tale suggests a beautiful paradox: Two people were fighting over a piece of land. Each claimed ownership. To resolve their differences, they agreed to put the case before the rabbi. The rabbi listened but could not come to a decision. Finally he said, “Since I cannot decide to whom this land belongs, let us ask the land.” He put his ear to the ground, then straightened up. “My friends, the land says that it belongs to neither of you – but that you belong to it.”

Our human-centered mindset has convinced us that we are entitled to everything around us. In fact, we are only small pieces that fit in the eternal puzzle of God’s creation. As with gifts of love or friendship from another person, we are called to take God’s gift of creation into our hearts with reverence and gratitude. We treat such gifts with tender care, as we would our own being; we imagine that perhaps we belong to the land and seek to be cared for in turn.

We are called to keep public lands in public hands and shift our attention to collaborating towards proper stewardship of the world around us. When we take action to protect public lands, we enhance our relationship with God and are ultimately more grounded in faith.

Jessica Zimmerle is one of Earth Ministry’s Outreach Coordinators.
Even though I've lived in Seattle for years, I may never be willing to give up my original identity as a Wisconsinite. I'm proud of Wisconsin's long history of encouraging environmental advocates, including two of my personal heroes: Aldo Leopold and John Muir. Growing up, it was exciting to know that these megastars of the environmental movement lived in, visited, and drew inspiration from some of the same locations I did. These two men helped shape the attitudes of the public as they brought awareness and passion to their ideas of wilderness, conservation, and love of the land.

In a recent reading of John Muir's *The Story of My Boyhood and Youth*, I was fascinated by the early experiences that molded Muir into an eccentric and devoted conservationist in his later years. He possessed the powerful skill of acute observation which he often trained on the landscapes surrounding him, drawing the American people into the beautiful and spirit-filled places he described. His legacy of fighting to protect those sacred places lives on today.

The stories from Muir's childhood moved me to reflect on some of my own most powerful experiences on public lands. Four years ago, I was a member of the Washington Conservation Corps, working to protect and restore Washington's forested park lands. Midway through my year, I took the opportunity to spend a week on a restoration crew headed to the north end of Lake Chelan near Holden Village and Stehekin. Chelan is a breathtaking lake valley stretching for miles along forested hills and towering, snowcapped mountains; let's just say no one needed to twist my arm to take the assignment.

My time in that majestic setting reinvigorated my connection to the land and allowed me space to become more aware of God's presence. I have felt that presence throughout my life in experiences as varied as camping in the Everglades National Park, hunting on public lands near my family's century old farm in Wisconsin, and walking on trails through Discovery Park here in Seattle. Like John Muir, Aldo Leopold, St. Francis of Assisi, and the many other stewards who came before us, we must stand up for the protection of our public lands.

As a person of faith I feel a moral obligation to consider our human impact on the planet. Although humans are only one strand in the web of creation, we have the remarkable ability to affect every other strand, and often with destructive consequences. As John Sawhill, the late president and CEO of The Nature Conservancy, once said, “In the end, our society will be defined not by what we create, but by what we refuse to destroy.”

The decisions, policies, and laws of today – good or bad – will be “remembered” by the land and our future generations for centuries. Let us then choose wisely to protect and steward the Earth and, in doing so, honor the incredible creation of our Heavenly Creator.

*Chris Olson is Earth Ministry’s Operations Manager.*
As fall made its approach, Americans were heading into the final weeks before their summer vacations become just a memory. For me, the highlight was a visit to the Olympic National Forest in my native Washington State. The ocean and mountains rejuvenate my spirit and foster a healthy perspective on my place in the cosmos.

It's God's creation. Let's protect it. By Rev. Richard Cizik

Alas, visits to our national parks and forests have been in a national decline since 1987, possibly by as much as 25 percent according to 2008 data published by the National Academy of Sciences. Whether due to “videophilia,” or just a change in habits, the consequence may be a weakened identification with nature that contributes to public apathy about protecting it.

Here’s what should alarm all of us: Our nation’s leaders are leasing out public lands to oil and gas companies like never before. But is there any outrage? Protest in the fashion of Woody Guthrie seems quite in order. From the Gulf Coast to California, Woodie Guthrie rode the rails, hitched, and by whatever means necessary followed the “dust bowl refugees” from Oklahoma and Arkansas to the West, in search of a better life. “God Blessed America” is the original title to Guthrie’s folk song, later replaced by “This Land.” He wrote it in 1940 in New York City, just after he had arrived from Oklahoma. Most of us know it now as “This Land is Your Land.”

The beautiful lyrics still ring in our ears:

From California to the New York Island, from the Redwood Forest to the Gulfstream waters, this land was made for you and me.

As I went walking that ribbon of highway, and saw above me that endless skyway, and saw below me the golden highway, I said: this land was made for you and me.

Guthrie’s powerful lyrics included the following verse that was never actually recorded:

There was a big high wall there that tried to stop me.
The sign was painted, said ‘Private Property.’
But on the backside, it didn’t say nothing.
This land was made for you and me.

According to Nick Spitzer of NPR Music, Woodie Guthrie’s daughter Nora may know why: the “private property” language. “This is the early ’50s, and [U.S. Sen. Joseph] McCarthy’s out there, and it was considered dangerous in many ways to record this kind of material,” she says.

For Millennials and those born more recently, this battle over public lands might ring hollow, or mean nothing at all. Maybe they don’t understand the term or relate to public lands — wilderness areas, national parks, and conservation areas. But if my own two sons, ages 20 and 22, are any indication, they fear that powerful lobbies have the power to purchase at will the...
Congress and the White House. The public’s land and resources are too easily turned over to the “drill, baby, drill” gang.

Sadly, they are right. What is happening is clear. This land, our land, the public’s land, is being seized in ever increasing measure for development. More precisely, it is being leased to oil and gas companies.

The previous 112th Congress was the first since World War II in which not a single new acre of public land was protected for the public as a national park, monument, wilderness area, or wildlife refuge. It shouldn’t come as a surprise, if you’re paying attention.

Instead, a study by the Center for American progress states that the Obama Administration has leased more than 6.7 million acres of public lands to oil and gas companies for drilling — more than double as much public land as it permanently protected for future generations. Overall, more than 37 million acres of America’s public lands are under lease to oil and gas companies for drilling.

For people of faith, this is about more than even changing policies which have been described as a “drill first” mentality to an “equal ground” policy of both drilling and conservation of our public lands in equal measure. It’s about saving a bit of God’s gift of plentiful natural resources for future generations. Call it a campaign to “save a bit of heaven.”

Why cast it this way? The New Testament scholar N.T. Wright in his book Simply Jesus puts it as follows: “Within Jesus’ world, the word ‘heaven’ could be a referent way of saying ‘God,’ and in any case, part of the point of ‘heaven’ is that it wasn’t detached, wasn’t a long way off, but was always the plan from which ‘earth’ was to be run. When, in the book of Daniel, people speak about ‘the God of heaven,’ the point is that this God is in charge on earth and will eventually set up his own kingdom there.”

Barry Goldwater, who was the GOP candidate for President in 1964, once wrote, “My mother took us to services at the Episcopal church. Yet she always said that God was not just inside the four walls of a house of worship, but everywhere — in the rising sun over Camelback Mountain in Phoenix, a splash of water along the nearby Salt or Verde rivers, or clouds driving over the Estrella Mountains, south of downtown. I’ve always thought of God in those terms.”

Since God has commanded us to “till it and keep it” (Genesis 2:15) and that there will come a time “for destroying the destroyers of the earth” (Rev.11:18), then we better listen up and pay heed. All of us together — elected officials, members of the faith community, and especially the young — ought to engage in an effort to protect it from the onslaught of development.

I imagine that were Woodie Guthrie alive today, he would be singing about this. How ‘bout it Arlo? If “God blessed America” as your father put it, then, for God’s sake, let’s save this land “made for you and me.”

Rev. Richard Cizik is president of the New Evangelical Partnership and spokesperson for the Good Steward Campaign.
From towering mountains to stark deserts, from glorious forests to wide open fields, God’s lands are the foundation of human community — where we live, work, play, and find spiritual renewal. People of faith have a moral obligation to protect these lands so that all God’s children — both human and non-human — can share in the bounty that flows from them.

Below are some suggestions for how you can be a faithful steward of America’s public lands.

**Expand Alpine Lakes Wilderness**
The Alpine Lakes Wilderness in Washington State’s central Cascades, designated by Congress in 1976, is one of the most visited wilderness areas in the country.

A current bill in Congress, the Alpine Lakes Wilderness Additions and Pratt and Middle Fork Snoqualmie Rivers Protection Act (HR 361), will expand this wilderness area by 22,000 acres. Adding this acreage will bring a richer diversity of ecosystems into the wilderness area and increase its overall biodiversity; it will also facilitate a broader array of outdoor recreational opportunities easily accessible for wilderness enthusiasts.

**What you can do:** Thank US Representatives Dave Reichert and Suzan DelBene for their efforts to expand the Alpine Lakes Wilderness Area, and encourage your Representative to support it. Find contact information at [www.house.gov](http://www.house.gov).

**Support the Antiquities Act of 1906**
The Antiquities Act of 1906 allows the President to designate as a National Monument federal lands which contain objects of historic, scientific, or scenic significance in order to prevent damage from commercial and other development.

Sixteen U.S. Presidents have declared over 140 national monuments under the Act – eight Republican Presidents and eight Democratic Presidents – modeling a bipartisan approach to protecting America’s most iconic places. Areas that have been protected through the Antiquities Act include the Grand Canyon and Denali (now national parks), and the Statue of Liberty.

Congress has also shown leadership in declaring 40 national monuments, and has re-designated 32 national monuments as national parks.

In recent years, however, numerous bills to weaken the Antiquities Act have been introduced in Congress. These attacks are inconsistent with the conservation value that Americans hold dear and run counter to economic prosperity; it has been
well documented that monuments support nearby communities by attracting tourism dollars and creating jobs.

Now is not the time to limit the options to protect these precious lands for future generations.

What you can do: Find your US Representative at www.house.gov and ask him/her to oppose any amendment to the Antiquities Act that would curtail Presidential authority to designate national monuments.

Protect the Land and Water Conservation Fund
In 1964, Congress made a commitment to the American public that a small portion of revenues from offshore oil and gas drilling would go to outdoor recreation and conservation as an offset for the depletion of resources that belong to us all.

The Land and Water Conservation Fund is essential for protection of our national and state lands. In Washington State alone, approximately $520 million has been invested over the last 40 years to expand public access to lakes and streams, build sports fields, trails, and local parks, conserve working forests and protect Washington icons like Mount Rainier, Alpine Lakes Wilderness, and the Pratt and Middle Fork Snoqualmie Rivers.

Without the Land and Water Conservation Fund, projects such as maintaining, protecting, and expanding our parks and wilderness areas will go unfunded.

What you can do: Encourage your Representative to oppose the elimination of the Land and Water Conservation Fund in the FY 2014 House Interior Appropriations Bill.

Keep Public Lands in Public Hands
The American people collectively own approximately 600 million acres of land and water in the United States. Over the years, there have been numerous proposals to transfer public lands to the states in which the lands are located and some suggestions to privatize all or some of these lands.

Privatization would restrict the public’s access to public lands and harm to the economic health of local communities that currently benefit from recreational visits. As people of faith, we believe in promoting the common good. We are called to keep these lands shared in trust by all American citizens.

What you can do: Ask your Representative to ensure that public lands are kept in public hands.

Equal Ground
In 2013, Hart Research polled nearly 1,000 voters in nine states and found that 65% of those polled thought it was most important to conserve public lands, while only 30% thought oil and gas development should be a priority. When given the opportunity to choose a third option, a majority instead say we should put conservation on equal ground with drilling for oil and gas. This is the case even among people who rate oil and gas as “very important.”

The Obama Administration has protected only 1 acre of land for every 2.4 leased to energy developers. The President and Congress can begin to make up the deficit of the past four years by working to permanently protect 4 million acres of land while protecting at least one additional acre for each acre leased to the oil and gas industry.

Responsible energy development can still take place, but in the context of a balanced approach to our lands. Equal Ground is a smart policy for today and is faithful stewardship for tomorrow.

What you can do: Ask your Representative to push for public lands to be put on equal ground with oil and gas development, so at least one acre of land is protected for every acre used for oil and gas.

We are compelled to speak out for justice while caring for the common good. Join Earth Ministry in calling all people to faithful advocacy on behalf of public lands.
that this very urban couple wanted their wedding photos in the midst of this not-so-urban natural place. When it came to their holy union, something deep inside of them called them outside.

And I think about how very fortunate they were that farsighted people have fought to preserve this park over the last 100 years, fighting to keep the D.C. suburbs from crawling up the Potomac and despoiling this spectacular gorge.

**Spiritual Geography**

What is it that draws us to wild lands? Eco-psychologists call this draw the “eco-unconscious” – a visceral, ancient connection with the earth that we carry in our DNA. Yet it seems that there is something even more fundamental about this connection. I believe that these wild lands are the essence of what Kathleen Norris calls “our spiritual geography,” which she describes as “the place where I’ve wrestled my story out of the circumstances of landscape and inheritance.”

Indeed, it was in these natural places that our young democracy wrestled much of its story out of the circumstance of the American landscape. Part of that story was informed by the seemingly insatiable American appetite for timber, minerals, and water. But another part of that story is informed by determined men and women who belonged to what Senator Dale Bumpers, former chair of the Senate Public Lands, Parks, and Forest Subcommittee, called the “wait-just-a-minute club.”

In the midst of expansive extraction of natural resources, these Americans have fought to preserve nearly 650 million acres of the American landscape as public lands, in the form of national parks, forests, monuments, and preserves. These Americans understood the imperative of protecting our spiritual geography.

This movement to conserve vast acreage was motivated in no small part by the visceral understanding of people of faith that the foundations of that faith had emerged from the wilderness itself. It was in the parched and spare terrain of the ancient Middle East that our ancestors first came to know God. It was here that they wrestled – in the case of Jacob quite literally – with the very nature of God. It was here that our ancient spiritual story began to unfold, always in the context of the land itself.

Scholar Walter Brueggemann says that the Hebrew Bible has been misunderstood as a book about deeds and argues instead that “Israel’s faith is essentially a journey in and out of land.” Beginning with God’s first promise to Abraham and continuing with Isaac and Jacob and generations after them, it is a story of searching, seeking, finding, losing, returning, settling, and struggling with the land.

We need look no further than God’s sending the Hebrews not directly from Egypt to the promised land, but first to the wilderness to prepare them to live in faithful community. It was there in the Sinai Desert that God first made God’s self known to the rag-tag community. It was in this wilderness that God sent rules and statutes to guide the new community, including statutes related to the proper treatment and relationship with the land itself. It was in the wilderness that they learned that the land is always a gift from God – unearned, a free and generous act of love from the Creator: “The land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants” (Leviticus 25:23).

**Jesus in the Wilderness**

Later on in our spiritual story, Jesus took to the wilderness to be baptized along the Jordan River. It was in this rugged land that God set in motion a ministry that would change the world. After his baptism, Jesus retreated in solitude to a harsh and cruel landscape to prepare himself for a ministry that would itself
often be harsh and cruel to him. As his ministry became more demanding, Jesus found comfort in the wilderness. He would often go “out to a deserted place, and there he prayed” (Mark 1:35). Like the religious writer, Beldon Lane, Jesus too found “solace in fierce landscapes.”

As our Christian traditions developed, others would follow Jesus to the wilderness. In the third and fourth centuries, devoted hermits fled to deserts of Egypt, Palestine, Arabia, and Persia to flee religious and societal entrapments. In the absolute spareness of the desert landscape with few if any comforts, these “Desert Fathers” were searching for a pure and undefiled experience of God.

At about the same time, Celtic Christianity was developing a religious culture that was dependent on listening for the Word of God in two primary ways: through Scripture and through the natural world. Living in rough coastal areas with unpredictable, often-violent weather systems, the Celts like the Hebrews before them experienced the presence of God on challenging lands.

Public Lands as Sacred Ground

The spiritual geography of our Christian heritage is inextricably bound up with place – particularly wild lands. It is in the emptiness and stillness of the wild where God is and we are most present. It is nearly impossible to fully understand, appreciate, and live into the Christian story without both acknowledging and experiencing this connection. The remaining American lands that can offer this experience are almost entirely held in trust on public lands – set aside, like Great Falls Park, to protect our spiritual geography.

It is in these wild sacred places that we reconnect with our spiritual history. Here we stand on the shoulders of our ancestors in faith and lean into what Walter Brueggemann describes as our “placed history.” In seeing the geysers at Yellowstone National Park, Mark Twain recalled the Israelites’ wandering in the Sinai Desert: “(I)t’s like had not been seen since the children of Israel wandered on their long march through the desert.” (Then he added this description of the odor of the geysers: “The smell of sulfur is strong, but not unpleasant to a sinner.”)

In these public lands, we seek to know Creator and creation – in the stunning canyons of Canyon de Chelly National Monument, in the glorious birches of the White Mountain National Forest, in the majestic old-growth Douglas-fir and cedar on public lands in western Oregon. In these places, we yearn to know – really know – our place in the midst of things.

Theologian Philip Sheldrake argues, though, that our experience of sacred place cannot be an end in and of itself. Just as the sacrament of the Eucharist is “not simply a practice of piety but the enactment of the special identity of the Christian community,” so too the sacrament of place requires response – commitment, participation, relationship, and covenant. We live into our spiritual geography by ensuring that these public lands continue to be held in trust to nurture, comfort, and inspire our spiritual descendants for generations to come.

The quotes from Steven Mather, Lafayette Bunnell and Mark Twain are excerpted from The National Parks: America’s Best Idea, a film by Ken Burns and Dayton Duncan (Florentine Films, 2009).

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Long before widespread ecological destruction and the privatization of most of the world’s lands, the rabbis mandated the protection of green space and public lands.

The Talmud proscribes a *migrash*, an area surrounding cities in Israel that must be uncultivated and forested (Baba Bathra 24b), and it is forbidden to live in a town that does not have green space (Kiddushin 4:12). Just as in Genesis humans were created to live with one another, we were also created to live alongside creation, and isolation from it harms us.

There is a parable told in the Talmud that a man was clearing stones from his property and dumping them on public land when a pious man happened by and asked, “Fool, why do you remove stones from ground which is not yours to ground which is yours?” The man laughed at him. Some time later he found himself in financial trouble and forced to sell his land. Walking on that public land he stumbled over those same stones, and exclaimed, “How wisely did that pious man say to me, ‘why do you remove stones from ground which is not yours to ground which is yours?’” (Baba Kama 50b).

The rabbis knew that in caring for public lands, the interests we are protecting are not just those of some vague “public” but are in fact our own. The well-being of our public domain should be even more important to us than that of our personal space, because with good stewardship, our public land will always be there for us and our children.

The Talmud recounts the story of Honi who, seeing a man planting a carob tree, asks him why he — already a grown man — is planting a tree that will not fruit for seventy years. The man replies, “I found this world provided with carob trees, and as my ancestors planted them for me, so I too plant them for my descendants” (Tractate Ta’anit 23a).

When we protect public lands, we are preserving wilderness not only for ourselves and our children, but also for the many non-human species with which we share the planet. “Woe to those who add house to house and join field to field, till there is room for no one but you to dwell in the land!” (Isaiah 5:8). Humans have been entrusted with the world to both care for and thrive on, but we are not the only ones gifted with creation. “God’s purpose is carried through everything — even through a snake, a scorpion, a gnat, a frog” (Breishit Rabbah 10:7).

If the world is a sacred trust, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch argues, abuse of the environment is tantamount to theft and self-idolatry. In a world where creation is rapidly being destroyed, Judaism tells us that we are stewards of this world for the divine, for our children, and for all life. We are called to preserve our public lands as places of refuge for the whole of creation and to strive to repair and expand land under this protection.
Since becoming an Earth Ministry Greening Congregation in 2005, Snoqualmie United Methodist Church has been dedicated to living out the motto, “act locally, advocate globally.” The green team of Snoqualmie UMC has put their faith into action locally by undertaking the maintenance of the Little Si trailhead, part of the Mt. Si Natural Resources Conservation Area.

The decision to get involved in Mt. Si trailhead cleanup came after Rev. Paul Mitchell’s four-week creation care sermon series in September 2012. This liturgical emphasis on responsible stewardship sparked a desire in the congregation to undertake greening action for the well-being of their local environment and community.

Rev. Mary Brown, the green team leader, references the creation story in Genesis 1 as compelling scriptural motivation for their actions. She shares, “In this story, God not only calls everything created ‘good,’ but entrusts care of this good creation to human beings. As people of faith, we must help to maintain Earth’s resources in a sustainable, healthy manner for all generations.”

Camaraderie and community flourish around Snoqualmie’s good work on the Little Si trailhead. A group of members gathers every month at the trailhead where they join hands to remove non-native vegetation, plant native cedar or fir trees, and keep the trail free of litter and debris. The work parties bring together people from all generations: children have fun learning about the importance of creation care as they work alongside their parents; a pre-teen girl enjoys transplanting seedlings; and, a senior member contributes homemade treats.

Rev. Brown takes her cue from Aldo Leopold’s words, “In order to save a place, you must first love it.” The church has fostered their love for the Snoqualmie Valley and the public lands found therein, a love that is growing as congregants are getting more involved in caring for Little Si. These volunteers have become determined to promote responsible actions to save this place as they can see firsthand the effects of both destructive and productive forest management, from past clear-cuts to present restoration projects.

The church green team remembers too that “God calls us to love the whole earth, so we must advocate globally.” Snoqualmie UMC started the annual Snoqualmie Valley Church World Service CROP Hunger Walk, a program that has expanded to include other local churches to raise funds and awareness of all who are hungry around the world. In 2013, the walk was hosted at Meadowbrook Farm, a scenic and historic land held in communal trust. The church has also emphasized responsible land use to help with local hunger issues by creating a pea patch on their property and contributing fresh produce to the Snoqualmie Valley Helping Hands Food Bank.

Snoqualmie United Methodist Church has successfully taken their greening actions beyond their own facilities and out into public lands. The congregation’s hard work and dedication has fostered creation care in their community, bringing to fruition the hope that their small church will “model good stewardship not only for the present community, but for those who will live in this beautiful valley for generations to come.”
"I love to think of nature as an unlimited broadcasting system, through which God speaks to us every hour, if we will only tune in."

– George Washington Carver