

FIVE FORKS BRETHREN IN CHRIST CHURCH

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SERMON: *God Outdoors*

SERIES: *Pathways*

SCRIPTURES:

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**Credit to Gary Thomas, John Ortberg,*

Well good morning and welcome to Five Forks Church.

Last Sunday was New Years Day and if you didn't have a chance to watch last Sunday's message I would encourage you to consider carving out some time this week, when you could sit down and watch that sermon. The reason is because it really sets the tone and direction for our church in 2023.

We looked at a passage, that is going to be a key focus for us this year...from **Colossians 1:28** where Paul writes this...

28 He is the one we proclaim, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ.

And it's that last little phrase that we really want to emphasize. We want to keep before all of us the staff, you all, the children, the students...the entire church this idea of "becoming fully mature in Christ." Our purpose in coming to church, in following Jesus, is to mature and grow more like Christ each day.

One of my favorite authors Dallas Willard said it like this,

"I am learning from Jesus to live my life as he would live my life if he were I."

But it's one thing to have good intentions, something totally different to have our intentions come to fruition.

How can we be intentional about this goal in 2023?

For the next several weeks we want to talk in really practical terms about how we might grow in maturity. We're starting the year, today, with a 9-week sermon series, called "**Pathways**".

Just because of the preaching schedule and how it's working out. We'll do six weeks in a row. And then we have short break for a couple of weeks and then we'll pick up with the final three weeks of the series after that. This series is based on a book by author Gary Thomas called, "Sacred Pathways".

I. Introduction to Pathways

The primary idea behind the pathways is that we, you and me, are different. Let me give you some examples of that...keep you awake and moving this morning, I'm gonna have you raise your hand (or tell the person beside you).

Extroverts and Introverts

Early morning vs. late morning...There are two kinds of people in this world, those who love to wake up early and those who hate people who love to wake up early.

Procrastinators vs. pre-crastinator

Squeeze toothpaste in the middle or work your way neatly up from the bottom

Make your bed every morning or leave it as is

Green Tractors or Red Tractors

The point is, there is incredible diversity in this room, right here, right now. And what that means is that the way in which we connect with God will happen in different ways. This is so crucial to our maturing process, that we understand this.

I'm gonna pick on the church for just a moment. Back when I was younger, growing up, there was this phrase we used to describe the pathway of connecting with God. We called it **"DAILY DEVOTIONS"** or daily quiet time.

The basic idea was if you want to get to know God it involved a few very specific things: you have to get up really **early in the morning** to do your daily devotions. This usually involved reading your Bible and the rule of thumb was to **read 4 chapters a day**, because if you read 4 chapters a day you can **read through your Bible in a year**. And then pray before and after you read your Bible. And there is often given **a format for those prayers**.

Now, pause for just a moment...there is nothing wrong with the daily devotion method for connecting with God. In fact, there is so much that is good and right about daily devotions.

The problem is when we think that this is the one and only method for connecting with God. This mentality is based on a one-size-fits-all approach to spiritual maturity. I can't tell you the number of people who have told me about feeling guilty about not doing the proper method of daily devotions. For so many people, devotions turned into a legalistic obligation rather than a personal relationship, life-giving time with God.

"Quiet time was adequate for starting a relationship with God but was not sustainable in the long. And was never replaced by other modes of 'cultivating spiritual maturity.'" (Thomas pg. 5)

We told people this is how you connect with God and when it wasn't working, many tried to force themselves into this mold and most people just gave up connecting with God altogether. And sadly, we stopped growing in maturity. If that's been your personal experience then this series is just such great news.

What's funny is we know this one-size-fits-all approach is just way too simplistic for the vast diversity of human personalities and learning styles!

I was thinking about this related to how we treat different sicknesses and ailments. You can't treat everything the same way. If you have a headache what do you normally take for your headache? Ibuprofin or Tylenol. But if you get the flu and stomach nausea, Ibuprofin is practically worthless. Or last year, when I was playing indoor soccer in at the high school, I fell and broke my right thumb (**PIC**). And it was incredibly frustrating. You have no idea how important that right thumb is and often you use it. Driving, tying shoes, shaving etc. And I wished the doctor could just prescribe Ibuprofin and I'd be good to go. But you have to wear a cast for 6 weeks, and the cast can't get wet, so you can't shower for 6 weeks. I was just thankful none of you picked up on the fact I didn't shower from February through March last year of if you did, you kindly didn't say anything about it. But when it comes to sicknesses...each is treated differently. The same can be said for connecting with God, we're all different...and that's ok.

In his book, Gary Thomas lays out 9 pathways for building connection and intimacy with God and they are listed on the screen behind me.

The 9 Pathways:

Naturalists

Sensates

Traditionalists

Ascetics

Activists

Caregivers

Enthusiasts

Contemplatives

Intellectuals

Not all of these will resonate with you. And, at the same time, I suspect more than one, will resonate with you.

The purpose of this series is to help all of us recognize the various pathways for connecting to God and then begin to explore and discover how we can be intentional in putting them into practice.

Don't get caught up on the names of the pathways. We'll be talking about each one over the next few weeks, explaining what each of those terms means. In addition, I have a little flyer for you to either take home with you. There are paper copies in the back or you can just scan the QR code in your bulletin for a digital version. We'll come back to that flyer as we conclude the message.

With the rest of our time this morning, let's just take a few minutes to talk about. The First Pathway...

II. The Naturalist Pathway to Maturity

(Not to be confused with the philosophical position called naturalism.)

The idea here, is that we were created, by the creator, to connect with and learn about God in the great outdoors. Naturalists are those who connect with God by surrounding themselves with "all that He has made."

In fact, even if you don't think this is your "primary spiritual pathway", we all need a little bit of the naturalist approach to connecting with God. Sometimes human nature teaches us the importance of the naturalist pathway.

All kinds of studies done on this...but human beings need sunlight. While it's true that too much sun and sunburn is dangerous to you...you actually need sunlight. The sun loads your body with beneficial vitamins and hormones. You can't see it

happening, but often you can feel it. When you walk outside on warm summer day and feel the warmth of the sun “wrap it’s arms around you.” In fact, when the sun hits your skin, your brain is triggered to release a hormone called **serotonin**. Serotonin is the happiness hormone...it makes you feel good, helps you to calm down. When we were little and had been playing inside for a while, my mom always used to say, “Go outside and get the stink blown off of you.” Without sun exposure your serotonin levels drop and which can make you feel depressed or “down in the dumps”. We even have a phrase, during the winter months to describe what is happening...we call it “the winter blues”. You were made to be outside!

When we lock ourselves inside, we leave behind part of God’s creation, his grand outdoor cathedral... Artificial comfort comes to us at a cost. (Thomas)

On a number of occasions I’ve referenced the 6 month trip that Jenny and I spent in Honduras. And I shared before that we spent one weekend out in this little rural village, Orocuina (**PIC OF OROCUINA**), that didn’t have electricity. One of the more memorable events on the trip was on that Sunday morning we got up to go to their church service. Only when we want to church they didn’t have a building, it was outdoors. It was 100 degrees and no air-conditioning. No light or sound equipment. There were no instruments. No visual graphics.

No auditorium with nice seats or chapel with padded pews to sit in. Instead, the seating they did have, were these little tree stumps. I was thinking to myself, oh boy, how is this gonna go?

Then this young man stands up in front of that small little crowd. And says we are here to raise our voices together as one and worship the king. And in broken acapello, the voices of this little village of people in Orocuina began to sing. I looked around at this humble outdoor gathering and I realized, I was the one missing out. God does not confine himself to comfortable air-conditioned buildings. The outdoors is God’s grand cathedral.

This is why, Scripture is chalked full of the naturalist approach to connecting with God.

A. Scriptural basis for the naturalist pathway.

One of my favorite stories in the Bible, is found in the book of Exodus. When Landon was little, he used to call it Moses and the firebush. God's people, the Israelites are slaves in Egypt and God is looking for a person to go into Egypt and lead his people out. And so he picks this guy named Moses.

Exodus 3:1 - Now Moses was tending the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian, and he led the flock to the far side of the desert and came to Horeb, the mountain of God.

Stop here for just a moment...Most of the stories in the Bible take place in the outdoors...the middle eastern desert. So desert, how would you describe a desert?

What are some things you don't find in a desert?

No people, no vehicles, no cell phones, no homes, no streets, there are no churches out in a desert, there are basically no sounds. (Stop for a moment and just listen). That's the sound of a desert, silence. It's called a desert because it's deserted of everything...even plants and grass and weeds, water want to stay away from the desert... Hot, dry, quiet. A desert is that place where there is nothing.

Moses is leading his flock to the far side of the desert, this place of nothingness.

And Moses has been doing this for 40 years. Year after year, day after day, Moses has been guiding his sheep around this vast, quiet, hot, dry deserted land. It's a place where nothing is, except...on this day...something amazing happens...

Exodus 3:2 - There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush.

Just like that God shows up, out of nowhere, in the middle of nowhere. Shouldn't he be back at the temple, in the holy of holies, in a church building? Shouldn't he be sitting up in heaven on a golden throne? Shouldn't He be at Five Forks, in the worship services and Sunday school classes and where the pastors are preaching sermons? Well yes, but not only there...God met Moses on the side of a mountain, in the middle of the desert. This is all over the Bible.

When God created the first paradise for man and woman. Where did he place them? In a garden!

We could argue that the Bible itself is intended to be read outdoors. So many of the illustrations and teaching points make reference to nature.

The Psalmist writes...

¹ The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. ² Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they reveal knowledge. ³ They have no speech, they use no words; no sound is heard from them. ⁴ Yet their voice^[b] goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world.

The Apostle Paul wrote in a similar vein in...

Romans 1:20 - ²⁰ ...since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made,

Paul is saying...you can learn about God...come to know God through His creation.

God met Hagar in the desert.
Abraham on a mountain.
Jacob at a river-crossing.

Jesus often taught using images from nature. In his famous sermon on the mount, he spoke of the birds of the air and the flowers in the field. And the sermon itself was preached where? Outside, on a mountain.

It seems pretty clear according Scripture that the naturalist pathway is one of the best ways for connecting with God. This is why we love the words in that classic hymn, “How great thou art...” (Verse 2)

“When through the woods and forest glades I wonder, and hear the birds sing sweetly in the trees; When I look down from lofty mountain grandeur and hear the brook and feel the gentle breeze; then sings my soul my Savior God to Thee, How great thou art, How great art.”

Naturalists are those who connect with God by surrounding themselves with “all that He has made” and it is one of the most common ways of connecting with God, described by Scripture.

But, the point is not just to be outside and say, “*I went outside now I’m meeting with God.*” We must be intentional, as we are outside, if we are going to grow in maturity in Christ.

Let’s just highlight a couple of things that we learn about God from nature.

B. What we learn from nature?

1. Through nature we learn dependence on God.

This is such a hard and yet valuable lesson to learn as we seek maturity in Christ.

And certainly learning to become responsible and independent is a good thing, so long as we remember that in the grand scheme of human life...we are dependent on God. Dallas Willard says, that God's address is "at-the-end-of-your-rope.com" When you finally realize you can't handle life on your own and you can't control life and your circumstances and you decide to give your life over to him that's when you've taken a huge step in your spiritual maturity.

There's a story in the book of Daniel (5:23) where one of the Kings is essentially making a mockery of Daniel and Daniel says...

You have praised the gods of silver and gold...which do not see or hear or know, but the God in whose power is your very breath and to whom belong all your ways, you have not honored. (NRSVUE)

Stop here for a moment. Take in a deep breath. Each breath is a reminder of our dependence on God. God is the creator and we are the creation. Nature teaches us this lesson.

²⁵ "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? ²⁶ Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? ²⁷ Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life^{lel}?"

²⁸ "And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. ²⁹ Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. ³⁰ If that is how God clothes the grass of

the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith?

Back when we were in college, **Jenny and I (PIC)** went out to this place called “boulder field” up just above Allentown, PA. It an immense field piled with massive boulders. We joked about picking the rocks in this field and moving them somewhere else (**OTHER PIC**). Of course that would be ridiculous. When you stand in boulder field you come to understand a piece of your human limitation and inadequacy in God’s grand universe.

As you drive to work and look at the vast Michaux Forrest or cover your feet in the immeasurable sand along the beach...could you imagine counting each tree or each grain of sand?

Psalm 8 - ³ When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, ⁴ what is mankind that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them?^[a]

Saint Bonaventure once remarked that those who wonder how God could hear the prayers of millions on earth simultaneously have been out of the forest for too long.

Creation reminds us of God’s magnificence and our dependence on Him.

Second, through nature we can come to understand...

2. God’s care for even the smallest details.

I love this one passage in Matthew 10, where Jesus says, **²⁹ Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground outside your Father’s care.^[b] ³⁰ And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. ³¹ So don’t be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.**

Jesus is saying, God cares about each bird in the universe and if God cares for such small details...how much more does he care about you and all of the finest details of your life.

It's fascinating when you consider the smallest details of our universe. I was reading about this...

Your body for example is made up of cells (**PIC OF CELL**), hundreds of millions of cells so small you can't see them with your naked eye. God made you out of particles you can't even see.

Within that cell are strands or coils of DNA (**PIC OF DNA**). The building blocks of life, the thing that makes you, YOU. That tells your body who you are and how to make more of you. And, this will blow your mind... Each strand of DNA if it were uncoiled would measure about 6 feet long. And if you were to take those tiny DNA strands out of your body, uncoil them and then line them up, you would end up with about 80 billion miles worth of DNA strand in your body...enough to stretch to the Sun and back more than 300 times!

But cells are actually made up of a smaller units called atoms. The earth is to an orange...as an orange is to an atom.

For the longest time, scientists believed the atom must be the smallest component of our body. In fact the word atom, comes from the Greek literally meaning "unable to split"...Until someone discovered you can "split an atom." Meaning atoms are made up of smaller units called subatomic particles. And on and on it goes.

(All numbers approximations☺)

Nature reveals to us God's care for even the smallest details of His universe.

Bernard of Clairvaux, a famous twelfth-century monk, wrote, **“You will find much more laboring amongst the woods than you ever will amongst books. Woods and stones will teach you what you can never hear from any master.”** (Thomas pg. 39)

Ok one more facet before I mention a few ways you can practice the naturalist pathway in your own life and that is let's be aware of...

C. One Caution for the Naturalist Pathway

1. Individualism

For Naturalists it can become easy to recluse ourselves to the outdoors and avoid people altogether.

And while it is true that Jesus spent significant time alone in nature, it was always as a way to prepare himself to go back into the world. Jesus said that our primary purpose on earth is to love God and love others. If nature pulls us so far away from the presence of others then we have strayed from God's intentions in nature.

You must be filled up, so that you can get back out there into the world of people. In addition for naturalists it can become easy to avoid structured religious settings. Like church services.

This is really important to understand. We are not saying, “Hey, the naturalist pathway is for me therefore, I can avoid being with people. I can avoid reading my Bible. I can avoid sitting in worship services. I can avoid musical worship.” That's not what we're saying. We're saying, if you resonate with the naturalist pathway, you must find time to intentionally be outdoors focused on God...so that you are filled up in order to participate in meaningful worship services, or so that your Bible reading or prayer can come to life for you. You cannot avoid the corporate gathering of God's

people or time spent in his Word or talking to God. Outdoors does not replace these practices but should be used to enhance and adapt them. Does that makes sense?

Ok, let's close our time this morning with an invitation this week is to connect with God intentionally in nature.

D. An invitation to go outside this week!

Remember, we're not just talking about, "Hey I went outside so now I'm connected with God." We have to be intentional about this. And this is where the flyer I mentioned earlier can be helpful and how you can potentially use this flyer.

On the inside flap (**PIC of inside flap**) you'll notice a few questions that will help you as you begin to discern if the naturalist pathway may be an effective method for you to connect with God. Remember we are seeking fuller maturity in Christ. Self-awareness...learning about yourself, who you are, thinking about what resonates or connects with you is crucial in your journey toward maturity in Christ.

Each week, I'll encourage you to fill out this self-evaluations, by the end of the series you should have 9 of these to compare.

And then if you look at the second page (**PIC second page**), you'll see that I have given one suggested format for trying out the naturalist pathway. There are a couple of Scripture references for you to read specifically related to connecting with God in nature. Read through some of the scriptures.

Leave the confines of your home, office, work, school...and enter God's natural Cathedral and do something outdoors.

Sit in the sunshine.

Hike the Appalachian trail.

Split a load of firewood.

Watch the sunrise or sunset.

Go sledding.

Pick something in nature (ie. a leaf, a bug, a flower, a snowflake...) and study it, examine it, watch it.

And then talk through the two reflection questions.

God's grand cathedral is all around us, if we will just walk outside and take notice!