

Stewards of our Faith: *Presence*

A Bible Study in Five Sessions by Dan Dick



Wellspring United Methodist Church
Lent 2020

Stewards of Our Faith: *Presence*

A Foreword to the Wellspring Faith Community

It is very interesting to offer a Bible study on *presence* at a time when people are being encouraged to engage in social distancing and isolation. It puts somewhat of a cramp on “community building,” “public worship,” “small group study” . . .

That said, this is a perfect opportunity to spend serious reflection time on the value of *presence*, on those ways that we are connected, integrated, synergized (if there is such a word, it means how we are stronger and better together than apart). It is sometimes good to be apart so that we can appreciate the importance of our relationships. Absence, can indeed, make the heart grow fonder.

So, we still offer this Bible study during our Lenten journey and beyond, but with some specialized and contextualized instructions. Each session offers questions and exercises for the individual, but with the intention of leading into group sharing. By all means, do the personal reflections—perhaps keep a journal—but also think of some creative ways to engage in community discourse. Enjoy the study at home with your family, email others you know who are using the study, set up a group phone call or video chat (Zoom, Skype, Google). Just call a friend, one-on-one and share your thoughts, but be sure to let them know what you are talking about so they don’t get confused by a call out of the blue asking them share their thoughts on “intentionally focused time with God” (session 1). Just because we can’t be face to face doesn’t mean we cannot stay connected.

Remember, just because we are isolated doesn’t mean we are alone. We are together as Wellspring community in spirit and at heart, and God is always with us.

I have added to the end of each session movie suggestions that connect to the weekly theme. I am putting title, year, and age rating with each film; not all are “family friendly” due to some language and situations. But all are about *presence* in some form or another. Films will give you something to fill your time while sequestered. I encourage you to send any movie recommendations you might have to me (ddick@wisconsinumc.org) or Barbara (barbara.a.dick@gmail.com), and we will share them on the Wellspring “Staying Connected” page.

Friends, we will get through this anxious and uncertain time—together. We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord, and we are one with each other, even though distance might separate us. I hope and pray you find grace, comfort, and encouragement in this study.

You are all in my prayers,

Dan Dick

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Introduction

“Will you be loyal to The United Methodist Church and uphold it by your prayers, your presence, your gifts, your service, and your witness?” This is a promise and vow asked of every person who joins The United Methodist Church. Generally, when people respond to the part about “presence” they are thinking about attending worship on Sunday morning. And for many, “upholding the church” by their “presence” means attending occasionally, when it is convenient. However, many people make a deep commitment to be an active part of the worshipping community.

Yet this promise of presence means much, much more than worship attendance. Being truly and fully present is a full-time job. In five sessions, we will explore five different aspects of the vow of presence. Our framing lens will be stewardship; how we manage the sacred trust of presence.

Session 1 focuses on “Present to God.” What does it mean to be as fully present to God as God is present to us? Session 2 is “Present to Self.” As Christian disciples, we need to manage wisely and well our use of time, energy, and gifts. Session 3 explores “Present to the Community of Faith.” This means much more than passive attendance at a worship service, though worship is a crucial element of true presence with the community of faith. Session 4 examines “Present to Neighbor.” What does it mean to be faithful in our stewardship of presence to those beyond our community of faith? Last, in session 5, we will delve into the concept of “Present to the World,” a reflection on our responsibility to make our world a better place.

Each session will have a subtext to take these large concepts of presence to a practical level. Session 1 is about our personal spiritual formation. Session 2 is about mindfulness and intentionality. Session 3 is about nurturing healthy relationships. Session 4 is about empathy and compassion. The last session is about radical generosity.

So, when you promised to be present, did you really understand what you were in for? Let’s explore it together.

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Session One—Present to God

St. Augustine was fascinated with the concept of God’s omnipresence—God is everywhere, all the time. We are never out of God’s sight or presence. We, therefore, make ourselves present to God by realizing that God is always with us. We become present to God by focusing our attention on God. Traditionally, there are significant ways we do this: in prayer, in worship, in ritual (including our sacraments), in making offerings, in sacrificial service, in spiritual direction, in meditation and contemplation.

This was so much easier to accomplish when there were fewer options clamoring for our time and attention. The Jewish and early Christian believers didn’t have televisions, telephones, computers, movies, recorded music, accessible books (or literacy, for that matter) and magazines. Making time for God was simpler when there was little else to do. Yet, spending time with God is an act of stewardship—managing wisely and well what we have received from God—namely time and relationship management.

Our Christian scriptures make it clear that God wishes to spend time with us. In order to become the people God created us to be, we need to seek God’s will and guidance. First Corinthians 4:1-2 says “Think of us in this way; as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. Furthermore, it is required of stewards that they be faithful.” Romans 12:1-2 instructs, “I appeal to you, therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Be not conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.” This cannot happen if we do not give God our full attention and an adequate amount of time.

A corporate executive attended a class I taught where I challenged participants to triple the amount of time devoted to God in prayer, worship, and study of scripture. He spoke up, “I don’t have time to give. I live off my calendar, and it fills up fast.” I suggested, “Perhaps you could ‘schedule meetings with God’, you know, get God on your calendar early.” He snorted, “That’s ridiculous!” I said, “What are you afraid of. Schedule an hour with God three days each week for a month; see what happens.” Long story short, he did it—and to this day he tells people it completely changed his life.

Read Matthew 6:1-18

Questions for Discussion:

1. How much time do you spend each week specifically and intentionally with God? (Remember, God is with you all the time; this question asks how fully present you are to God.)
2. What are the benefits of intentionally focused time with God?
3. How actively do you seek to “discern what is the will of God,” individually and with others?

Stewardship of Presence: Assignment

- Individually—make a commitment to spend specific, intentional time with God. Imagine how you will use this time.
- As a small group (or as a family)—as you feel comfortable, share the commitment you will make for the coming week.

Stewards commit to continuous improvement and the enrichment of their relationship to God. This is the heart of personal spiritual formation. Make space in your busy schedule to meet with God. Make sure there is enough time to both talk to God and listen for God.

Film Suggestions

- *Romero* (1989, PG-13) An amazing biography of Bishop Oscar Romero, and his struggle with God’s call to radical discipleship

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- *Therese* (1986, not rated) vignettes about St. Therese of Lisieux and her concept of “the little way” (subtitled)
- *Brother Sun, Sister Moon* (1972, PG) Dramatization of St. Francis and St. Clare and God’s decree to “restore my Church”
- *The Miracle of Marcelino* (1955, G) Charming film of a young orphan raised by monks who develops a special relationship with Jesus and the Virgin Mary (subtitled)
- *The Sacrifice* (1986, PG) Fantasy about a family responding to the outbreak of World War III, and a father who makes a deal with God to restore peace on earth (subtitled)
- *Oh, God!* (1977, PG) A light-hearted look at what happens when God actually appears in a person’s life
- *Bruce, Almighty* (2003, PG-13) A man challenges that he can do a better job than God at running the world, and he gets the chance to prove it

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Session Two—Present to Self

This may seem like an odd concept to some. When are we not present to ourselves? It is impossible to escape myself! Everywhere I go, there I am. And yet, how often are we distracted? How often are we just drifting along? How much time do we focus our attention on Facebook or email or television or a good book? How much time and energy do we direct to our phones and electronic devices? How often do we waste time doing not much of anything?

There is a wonderful Greek word used occasionally in the New Testament—*Prosektikós*—which means mindful, careful, or attentive. It can also mean pursue or proceed with. Interestingly, it is often translated as “listen” or “take heed.” In every sense, it means to be present, fully present, aware. It is at the heart of the practices of meditation and contemplation.

Paying attention, deep concentration, and non-distracted focus take time and practice. Mindfulness, meditation, and introspection have all been proven to have physiological, emotional, and cognitive benefits. We become better listeners. We see more. We hear more. We remember better. We are more attuned and in touch. We become better communicators. These things won’t happen naturally or by accident. “Me time” is actually a valuable commodity. So, turn off, tune out, and drop in(ward)—(this is a parody of a quote that shows my real age . . .).

Reread Romans 12:1-2 from last session, then continue through verse 8.

Questions for Discussion:

1. How clear and accurate an “assessment” of yourself do you believe you have? What are your gifts? What are your strengths? What are your weaknesses? Where do you feel you honor and please God? Where could you improve?
2. What do you believe God’s will is for your life? For the church? For the world?
3. Look at Galatians 5:22-23. Which fruit are produced in abundance in you? Which are lagging? What would it take to mindfully produce all nine aspects of the fruit of the Spirit?

Stewardship of Presence: Assignment

- Individually—take a few minutes and look around the room and pay attention to everything you see. What do you notice, perhaps for the first time?
- In groups of three to four (or as a family)—share everything you remember about the most recent worship service you attended in person. Together, describe in detail what you saw, heard, smelled, felt, tasted. Share your memories, attending to similarities and differences.

Some hints:

- What hymns were sung?
- What scriptures were read?
- What was the focus of prayers?
- What paraments and banners were used?
- What was the picture on the bulletin?
- What children were present for the children’s time?
- What was the sermon about?
- What did the worship leaders wear?
- Who sat in front of you?
- Who sat in your row?
- Who sat in back of you?
- What announcements were made?

Stewards commit to continuous improvement and the enrichment of their relationship to God and God’s people. We are instructed to love God first and love our neighbor as we love ourselves. Self-love is a prerequisite to being able to love others. Make sure to spend some time with yourself—focused, intentional, reflective, and attentive.

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Film Suggestions

- *Inside Out* (2015, PG) An animated exploration of how we deal with our emotions; how they rule us, how we master them, and everything in between
- *The Pursuit of Happyness* (2006, PG-13) A man learns how to reinvent himself and take responsibility for being a father and the decisions he has made
- *Hunt for the Wilderpeople* (2016, PG-13) Weird and wacky coming-of-age story of a young boy on the run with his adopted guardian
- *The Incredible Shrinking Man* (1957, not rated) Perhaps an odd choice, but a very good film about what happens when everything you know and are changes forever
- *Boyhood* (2014, R) A film 12 years in the making that follows the real-time development of a boy and the process of becoming
- *Still Alice* (2014, R) A film about the rapid descent into Alzheimer's disease, the changes it forces and the impacts it has
- *Moonlight* (2016, R) A powerful film of a young African American at three phases of his young life, the challenges he faces, and his journey toward self-actualization

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Session Three—Present to Community of Faith

Okay, now—finally—we talk about presence in the community of faith, including worship. Why is it important to be present in worship (whether that's in person or online)? What do we lose if we don't attend worship regularly? Can't an individual be as good and faithful a Christian on her/his/their own without attending worship?

When Moses and the prophets, Jesus and Paul used the word *you*, it was overwhelmingly in the plural. In both the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, true faith was a corporate, rather than an individual, endeavor. No one in the Old or New Testaments would understand our modern-day concept of personal (or individual) salvation. We are part of a people, a community, a family, a body—an indivisible entity. This is a very difficult concept for 21st-century Christians to embrace and understand.

But it is critically important. An individual cannot possibly become the person God needs them to be on their own. It is in fellowship that we become the body of Christ. It is in community that our faith is tested, challenged, formed, and perfected. If we are not present in a community of faith, we are never fully present to God. In a significant way, *me* is always subservient to *we*. *We* are the people of God, the children of God. *We* are the body of Christ, the incarnation of Christ for the world. It is rarely a solo act.

What we lose by not worshipping with a community of faith is the lived witness of God active in other people's lives. Every person has a unique relationship with God and Christ, but at the same time, each person has a limited and incomplete relationship with God and Christ. The people of God are like a divine jigsaw puzzle, each piece important and necessary to the greater picture. We are incomplete when we are apart. It is impossible for us to be a whole, strong, faithful Christian in isolation from our community/communities of faith.

Read 1 Corinthians 12. There is no ambiguity in this passage. We are made one, single body in Christ. We are members of this body. We worship one Lord. We share one baptism. We are connected by one faith. Every one of us is gifted, and when we use our gifts in combination, *synergy* occurs; together we are greater than the sum of our parts. We cannot achieve what God intends us to accomplish alone. It is only in intentional and regular relationship with each other that we can discern and do God's will.

Another apt metaphor for our Christian faith is that of a tapestry. Each of us has a unique color, texture, length, and strength, but until we are woven together, we cannot fulfill our purpose. And should you pull or break one thread, it negatively impacts the whole. We are only as strong as our weakest member; this is why it is so important that we take care of each other and share our strength and support.

In a community of faith, we can discover, affirm, develop, and employ God-given gifts, skills, knowledge, and experience that can be used in ministry. If worship is our only connection and contact with our community of faith, this probably will not happen. Beyond worship, the vow of presence means we will engage in the study of scripture, Christian conversation, and Christian service (in person or online).

Christian service takes two basic forms: serving within the church to develop, maintain, and implement mission and ministry; and beyond the congregation to serve the community and the world. Presence in the community of faith is not a passive spectator sport, but an active engagement in the work and function of the congregation.

Questions for Discussion:

1. How you understand the relationship between your personal faith formation and development and that of a fellowship or community of faith?
2. In what ways are we stronger together than we are on our own individually?
3. What are some of the ways we can more adequately serve and fulfill God's will as a community of faith than we can as individuals?

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Stewardship of Presence: Assignment

- Individually—make a list of the gifts, strengths, knowledge and experience you bring to a group. List those things you look for others to bring that are not your strengths.
- As a small group (or as a family)—Share your lists. Make a composite list of all the things you share collectively that make you stronger together than individually.

Stewards commit to continuous improvement and the enrichment of their relationship to God and God's people. For the coming week think of ways you might develop and strengthen your gifts, skills, and knowledge. How might your community of faith aid you in this development?

Film Suggestions

- *Babette's Feast* (1987, G) The transformation of a Christian community through sharing a fabulous meal prepared by a gifted, loving, giving "house servant". Beautiful film (subtitled)
- *Toy Story 3* (2010, G) Keep a hanky handy; true community of faith is not always Christian, nor is it always even human. This is a fabulous parable about true community
- *Sister Act* (1992, PG) Transformation of Christian community from dying, drab, and dismal to vibrant, lively, and joyous
- *As It Is in Heaven* (2004, not rated) A disaffected and depressed professor returns to his small village and gets sucked into leading a church choir, leading to mutual transformation
- *Remember the Titans* (2000, PG)/*Coach Carter* (2005, PG-13) Two sports films—one football/one basketball—that follow the formula of a rag-tag bunch of losers whipped into world-class teams. Both worth while
- *The Way* (2010, PG-13) Story of a man who travels to recover the body of his son who dies while walking the Camino de Santiago, decides to finish the walk to honor his son, and experiences community all along the way
- *Troop Zero* (2019, PG) Young loner girl creates a scout troop hoping for a trip to space camp, but ends up finding the meaning of community and true friendship
- Basically, any episode of *Big Bang Theory* or *Friends*: both illustrate how deep friendship creates true community built on faith, hope, trust, and love; plus, they are generally a riot

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Session Four—Present to Neighbor

Read Luke 10:25-37

To consider the answer to the question, “And who is my neighbor?” it is important to contrast and compare the culture in which this story was written and our culture/world today.

While the population of Jerusalem was estimated to be around 600,000 when Jesus was alive, other “major” towns such as Jericho and the region of Galilee had maybe 200–400 people living in them. Most of the people in each town knew each other well, even being related to one another. Only 1 in 50 traveled further than 30 miles from home in their entire life. Taking care of neighbor and family was not only simple and easy but was the expected norm. The parable that Jesus tells highlights that the traveler was not only a stranger but a despised rival. Jesus challenged the idea that our responsibility to neighbor rests only with those we know and like. Our neighbor is anyone in need, especially the stranger, and even the enemy.

That opens up a whole new vista for us today. We don’t have to leave our own neighborhood to find someone strange, alien, foreign, disliked, or possibly threatening. In our heavily populated cities and towns today, we do not need to look far for those in need, for those who are injured or oppressed, vulnerable and marginalized. Whoever we pass on the street or sit next to in a theater or restaurant; whoever we encounter from another race, ethnicity, culture or tradition falls into the category of “neighbor.”

For this reason, we have no excuse for not caring for “our neighbor.” Stewards of presence have a responsibility to be present to those in need. The Greek term *sympónia* means sympathy or compassion, but interestingly is also the root for the word “symphony.” Its broader meaning is to be in harmony with, to feel as others feel, or to empathize. The early Latin terms translated “fellow feeling,” and later, “to suffer with.” God’s intention, communicated to us through Jesus, is that once again we are all connected, therefore we have a fundamental responsibility for each other, whether directly related, known or not.

Once again, however, this is not meant to happen solely on an individual basis. Even in Jesus’ day, disciples were sent out two by two. The parable Jesus taught illustrates directly how unsafe it was for individuals to travel alone. There are many people today with terrific needs who turn to violence, have emotional and mental afflictions, or who have various pathologies that make it unsafe for individuals to try to tackle these needs alone. This is why we are the church. There is safety in numbers. There is a diversity of gifts, so that some may serve on the front lines, others may coordinate from the sides, while still others work behind the scenes.

One congregation ministered to and with a minimum-security prison facility. One group within the congregation coordinated volunteers to do visitation and lead worship and Bible study, another group created the study materials, others donated Bibles and materials, while still others actually worked on site at the prison. There were some who were afraid to go to the prison, but they still supported the ministry. There were some who didn’t feel adequate to teach or lead worship, but they still found ways to support the ministry. The whole church was involved, but in a wide variety of ways.

Another congregation committed itself to literacy as a key ministry. They offered adult, youth, and children’s literacy programs. Some felt called to work with older adults, younger adults, teenagers, and younger children. Many donated money and materials that could be used. Some stepped up to become tutors. An English as a Second Language (ESL) program emerged. An effective ministry required a broad diversity of skills, knowledge, abilities, desires, and passions. When they worked together, the end result was greater than the sum of the parts. Everyone was engaged, even if they did not actually work face-to-face with the students.

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No community of faith can do everything, but every community can do something significant and meaningful. As we make commitment to be present to God, to self, to our community of faith, we are prepared and equipped to be present to our neighbors, whoever and wherever they may be.

Questions for Discussion:

1. How does responding to and serving neighbor as a community instead of as an individual impact your thinking? While this is not an “either/or,” it does help us frame those things we can do on our own, and those things that make sense to do together.
2. What are some of the major factors that prevent us from “serving neighbor” in our day? What can we do about these things?
3. Where do you see the greatest opportunity for this community of faith to serve our neighbors?

Stewardship of Presence: Assignment

- Stewards commit to continuous improvement and the enrichment of their relationship to God and God’s people. For the coming week, practice mindful attention to your community and neighborhood. Where do you see need? Where are the strangers right in our own vicinity with whom we might engage in new ways?

Film Suggestions:

- *Lars and the Real Girl* (2007, PG-13) Awkwardly shy man creates a loving relationship with a sex doll (no, don’t even let your mind go there) and the whole community, including his church, rallies to support them both
- *Up* (2009, PG) An old man and a young boy fly off into one adventure after another, learning about friendship, generosity, and understanding as they go
- *Finding Forrester* (2000, PG-13) Assumptions, stereotypes, competing cultures, and living up to/down to expectations are explored through the relationship of a reclusive professor and a intellectually and physically gifted young man
- *The Holiday* (2006, PG-13) The list needed at least one Christmas movie, and this is it for one major reason—the beautiful relationship between a young British woman and the 90-year old man next door. Oh, yeah, the rest of the movie is good, too
- *The Help* (2011, PG-13) Racial stereotypes and the ways we make differences more important than our similarities are beautifully explored. Embarrassing at times to think we ever acted this way, there is also a celebration of our ability to change
- *Henry Poole Is Here* (2008, PG) Even when we don’t intend to, we touch and change other people’s lives, sometimes for the better. A charming tale of faith, miracles, and hope
- *Schindler’s List* (1993, R) Compelling story of a greedy and heartless German businessman moved to sacrifice everything to assist over 1,100 Jewish citizens

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Session Five—Present to the World

John Wesley famously said, “I look on all the world as my parish; thus far I mean, that, in whatever part of it I am, I judge it meet, right, and my bounden duty, to declare unto all that are willing to hear, the glad tidings of salvation.” He took very seriously Jesus’ words from Matthew 28:19-20, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always to the end of the age.”

The church—you and me and all baptized believers and all who confess Jesus the Christ as Savior and Lord—exists as a presence and witness in the world. It is not enough just to exist; we must be present. Our stewardship of presence makes us ambassadors. We have been authorized by God to represent God in the world. Through our baptism and life together, we are the incarnation of the Christ for the world. Everywhere we go, everything we say and do, is a reflection on God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit. Our ministry extends holistically and through each one of us whenever we walk out the door into the public sphere.

A simple question: when a person looks at you, do they see God? Do our words and actions illuminate God’s values and priorities? We are stewards of God’s reputation. What people think of God is our responsibility.

God grants us the responsibility but also the authority to represent God, Christ, and Spirit in the world. This is another reason we don’t go it alone but move forth into the world as an integral part of a community of faith. We support, guide, counsel, and encourage each other to be the best ambassadors for God that we can possibly be.

Key to this ability is the cultivation of a culture of generosity. This is about much more than giving money. True generosity is a creative, generative, dynamic, and transformative ethos or orientation to all God’s creation. People can give and still not be generous, but it is impossible to be generous and not give. Our world needs generous people—people willing to give time, energy, passion, love, kindness, compassion, mercy, forgiveness, and healing. This should be what sets us apart from any other nonprofit, secular, or social institution. We do this all because God has done it for us. We have been blessed to be a blessing. We serve and give and heal as outward and visible expressions of our faith and relationship with God. We should shine as light in the world, but it is not our own light, but the light of Christ that shines through us. We cannot hide this light under a basket. We must get outside of ourselves, our church building, our comfort zones to be God’s love and grace in the world.

Read Philippians 2:1-15

Questions for Discussion:

1. Share what it means to you to have “the same mind that was in Christ Jesus,” remembering that the “you” here is plural, not singular.
2. How can we engage in the practice of “working out our own salvation with fear and trembling” (again, plural, not singular)? Where do we see evidence of God working in us that we might “both will and work for God’s good pleasure”?
3. Where do you see the greatest opportunity for this community of faith to serve our world?

Stewardship of Presence: Assignment

- Stewards commit to continuous improvement and the enrichment of their relationship to God and God’s people. For the coming week, practice mindful attention whenever you leave your house. Note ways you believe you are modeling God’s love and grace in what you say and do.

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Film Suggestions:

- *Which Way Home* (2006, PG) Heartbreaking story of children refugees escaping Central America, traveling through Mexico, with hopes of finding a new home in the United States
- *The Visitor* (2007, PG-13) A powerful film about awakening to the crisis and threat immigrants face, and what one person can—and cannot—do
- *Aquarela* (2018, PG) This film may seem a stretch, but it is a “waters-eye-view” of life on our planet, how precious it is, and how we must change our relationship with it if we are to have a future
- *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006, PG) The same goes with climate change. This film was relevant to our “presence on the earth” in 2006; so much more so today
- *The Plague* (1992, R) Maybe too soon, given the coronavirus, but this is the story of a plague hitting a South American city and the various responses to the disaster
- *Yesterday* (2019, PG-13) Imagine a world without the Beatles, then think about one musician who remembers all their music and rises to global fame. An imaginary tale of small decisions that have global impact
- *The Biggest Little Farm* (2018, PG) Through the journey of a husband and wife deciding to pursue a more natural, balanced life, the complexity of nature, the interconnectedness of our world, and the importance of faithful environmental stewardship are highlighted