

Earth, Air, Fire, Water

Camping Sunday Service

by Karen Bridges and Shauna Gibbons

Background Information

This liturgy will help your congregation join in the celebration of our United Church camps. Once upon a time, camps were exclusively summer-time events for children only, but modern times have transformed and broadened our expectations of the church camp experience. There are family camps, moms and daughters/dads and sons camps, preschool day camps, school-year youth events, fall gatherings, winter retreats, spring conferences, and, of course, summer children's camps.

We invite you to participate in this liturgy to renew our call to silence the chaos of our lives and re-enter God's call from the wilderness, the same wilderness that houses camps across our United Church. The gift of camp is the opportunity and space to recognize that every minute of every day we are in relationship: relationship with each other, relationship with creation, and relationship with God; and with this comes the recognition of responsibility and connectedness. We have been called into partnership. The precious gift we celebrate is our rich history of supporting spaces and places in our church where the sole purpose is to reconnect with our souls and the Spirit that nourishes us.

So come! Let's celebrate!

You Will Need

- a large symbol for each of the elements—air, earth, water, and fire
- small symbols representing each element that will be given to each member of the congregation (examples: feather, rock, shell, candle)
- one or more camper willing to share their experiences as they relate to the scripture
- a bell or recorded bell sound

Camping Sunday Liturgy

We encourage you to use the Announcement Song at the beginning of the congregation's announcements.

GATHERING

Leader: A voice cries from the wilderness: prepare the way of the Lord.

Element of Air

(Symbol of air might be a feather, dove, or balloon. Symbol is paraded in, perhaps by a clown or liturgical dancer if your congregation is so blessed. If not, hold high the symbol, treating it with reverence for it represents God's Spirit. Continue in silence. Encourage everyone to take a few moments of silence and concentrate on their breathing. The silence is broken by the sound of a bell ringing. Have the congregation stand and recite together the Salutation to the Dawn.)

Salutation to the Dawn (from the Sanskrit)

Listen to the salutation of the dawn. Look to this day, for it is life. The very life of life. Within its brief span lie all the verities and realities of your existence: the bliss of growth, the glory of action, the splendour of beauty. For yesterday is but a dream, and tomorrow is but a vision. But today, well-lived, makes every yesterday a dream of happiness, and every tomorrow a vision of hope. Look well, therefore, to this day.

Call to Worship

Leader: We gather round this day in community and faith.

All: We come as our ancestors, Joshua, Moses, and Ruth, to gather to tell of God's abundant love.

Leader: We gather round to hear of God's love for all of creation.

All: We come as our ancestors, St. Frances of Assisi and Julian of Norwich, knowing we are part of creation.

Leader: We gather round in memory of the wilderness to wait for God's call to us.

All: We come as our ancestors, Paul, Peter, Martha, and Mary, waiting for God's call to us today.

Leader: We gather round this day to remember and celebrate our church, and the places in which we can experience firsthand God's call to the wilderness.

All: We come as our ancestors, Miriam and Aaron, singing our abundant joy for the beauty of this land, and our United Church camps that connect us with all those who have come before us.

Prayer of Approach

Creator God, we hear your wilderness cry from the depths of our souls and long to answer. We seek you out in the silence and beauty of nature, in the sound of the birds, the rustling trees, the lapping water, and the crunching of branches. Our eyes and ears are opened to your presence in the newness of day, the brisk air, and the colours of the sunrise. Be with us in this time of storytelling and memories,

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guiding us along the forest's edge into oneness with you. May we follow faithfully the footsteps of Jesus in this and all the paths of our lives. Amen.

Hymn

"Spirit, Spirit of Gentleness" (*Voices United* 375) or "Morning Has Broken" (VU 409)

TO HEAR GOD'S WORD

Element of Earth

(Grounding/nourishment. What is our relationship with creation?)

Leader: I will show you what someone is like who comes to me, hears my words, and acts on them. That one is like a man building a house, who dug deeply and laid the foundation on rock; when a flood arose, the river burst against that house but could not shake it, because it had been well built. (Luke 6:47–48)

(Parade in symbol of earth: a bag of soil, sand, sod, a rock, etc. This parade is as before, only with earth. Litany could be led by one or more people with camping experience.)

Leader: Sandcastles, blooming flowers, roads for travel...

All: God's good earth is bountiful!

Leader: Playgrounds, grain in the field, hiking trails...

All: God's good earth is bountiful!

Leader: Mud pies, grassy meadows, hillside chats...

All: God's good earth is bountiful!

Leader: Thanks be to God!

Children's Time: Continuum

Gather children as is your custom. Explain the game is to gauge a continuum. Go as high as you can if you agree totally, as low as you can if you extremely disagree, and anywhere in-between. For those who are unable to stand, suggest that they create their own scale by lifting and lowering their arms or fingers.

Example: For statement 1, if I have lived in a camp my whole life, I will jump high in the air, whereas I will lie on the floor if I haven't even heard of camp. Limit the statements to five of those suggested here.

1. I have been going to camp my whole life v. I have never been to camp.

2. I love to sing and tell stories around the campfire v. I don't like to sing or tell stories.
3. I spend a lot of time working on the physical parts of a camp.
4. I have been a part of many kitchen raids.
5. I've met some of my best friends at camp.
6. I feel closest to God in nature.
7. Skit night at camp is so much fun.
8. I made the coolest crafts at camp.
9. I was involved in a lot of water fights.
10. I was really good at archery at camp.
11. I never wanted to leave camp at the end.

Leader: When I talk with people about where they feel closest to God, most people say "in creation." In our service today, creation or the wilderness is symbolized by the elements—air, earth, water, and fire. In The United Church of Canada, we are very lucky to have dedicated people who give us spaces and places "in creation" known as camps where the natural surroundings help us to hear God's call and feel God's presence. Today, on Camping Sunday, we celebrate our church and the camps that teach us how to wait with patience, laughter, and thoughtfulness for God's voice.

(If the children are leaving the worship area for church school, invite them to take a symbol before they leave.)

Prayer

Dear God, thank you for camps that help us feel your love in everything. Help us to live always with respect in your creation, even when we are far away from the wilderness. Amen.

Hymn

"We Are Pilgrims" (VU 595) or "Walk with Me" (VU 649)

Scripture

Exodus 32:1–34 (*The story below is a modern adaptation of the Exodus passage.*)

Background Information to the Scripture

(The Israelites were walking through the desert and they had forgotten what was commanded of them: they were worshipping and sacrificing to idols. They had forgotten the Ten Commandments. They were eventually reminded to pitch their tents for worship, remembering the foundations of their faith.)

Have We Lost Our Way?

Once upon a time there was a group of people who were lost—very lost. In fact, they were so lost they forgot where they were going, or why they left in the first place. They desperately wanted to remember, so they had a huddle and gave one another suggestions.

One person suggested they watch TV for the answers. After all, with so many channels, the answer must be there somewhere. So they watched and they watched and they watched. They bought lots of neat things from the shopping channel, got hooked on reality TV, heard their fortunes on the psychic network, and saw lots of royalty, but they were no closer to finding out where they were or remembering where they were going.

After another huddle, one person suggested they go to the local village and ask for directions. Now, they figured, this must be the way to find the answers they so desperately needed. So after two days' journey, they found themselves in a village that was very hospitable. In fact, a town party had just started, and all the people joined in with the villagers. They ate lots of fries and burgers, and an extra large pop for everyone topped the feast. They partied through the night and into the next day. As you can imagine, the party created a big mess. So the people stayed on a couple of extra days to help the villagers clean up, which was very polite of them but got them no closer to finding the answers they sought.

After yet another huddle, one person suggested they go to the great tower. Why, that must be the answer! Great people of great wealth had built that tower, so they must be able to help with all their great wisdom! So the people took a very large (and I might add expensive) taxi ride to the great tower. People were rushing here and bustling there, but no one even stopped to say hello. The people tried waving their arms, jumping up and down, and even singing songs, but the only attention they got was from one very busy person who merely threw them a loonie. This was definitely not the way to find the answers!

Discouraged and heartbroken, the people returned to wherever it was they were from and started to cry: "We will never be found!" It was then that the scruffiest person of the bunch, a person named Mo, spoke. Mo said that if the people stopped, took a deep breath, and just listened, maybe that would help. A few people laughed at this suggestion, and a few people ignored it. But most of the people did what Mo suggested. They stopped, took a deep breath, and just listened.

"We are in the wilderness," shouted one person. "We used to be slaves, but now we are free," shouted another. "We were promised a new life," cried another very relieved person. "Yes, God has made promises to us, and we have promised God our faithfulness!"

Before anyone knew it, they had pitched their tents, started singing their favourite hymns, and were remembering God's presence in their lives. With a roaring chorus of "Valderie, Valder-ra, my knapsack on my back," the people continued their journey, knowing they weren't so lost after all.

The end.

Reflection

Invite one or two campers in your congregation to provide a brief reflection on their experiences at camp in relation to the following questions:

- What does it mean to be grounded in faith?
- Where do we find nourishment?
- What is our relationship to creation?

If no one is willing to share, invite the congregation to turn to one another in groups of two or three to share the exploration of these questions.

Element of Water

(Relationships. A symbol for water is paraded in. For water, you might use a shell, water droplets cut from construction paper, a bowl or bucket of water, water wings, or a kiddie pool.)

Leader: They shall be like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream. It shall not fear when heat comes, and its leaves shall stay green; in the year of drought it is not anxious, and it does not cease to bear fruit. (Jeremiah 17:8–9)

(Sound of pouring water is heard.)

As water connects all life and all life connects to water, so too are we called to remember that we are one in God. At camp, a source of water is often readily available. Water is a key feature of water fights, canoeing, swimming, and other games. We also acknowledge that the summer often brings rain, and with rain we find new and creative ways to pass the time, whether it is with crafts, indoor games, or story time. We are now going to create a rainstorm using our bodies.

Rainstorm

(Start on one side of the congregation and ask people to join in gradually with the various moves until the entire congregation is making the same sound. Then start at the beginning with the next sound. Tell the congregation to make the sound until the leader shows them the next move. This will continue like a wave.)

1. Rub your hands together.
2. Snap your fingers.
3. Drum on your lap with your hands.
4. Stomp on the floor with your feet.
5. Drum on your lap with your hands.
6. Snap your fingers.
7. Rub your hands together.
8. End in silence.

Passing the Peace

Hymn

"I've Got Peace Like a River" (VU 577) or "Shall We Gather at the River" (VU 710)

TO RESPOND IN FAITH

Element of Fire

(Light the "campfire," which could be a candle, a real campfire, a video projection, or an electric fire, etc. This should be done with reverence as per the parading in of the other three symbols.)

Leader: When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish that you have just caught." Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast." (John 21:9–10, 12)

Hymn

"Fire's Burning" (*sung in a round*) or "It Only Takes a Spark" (VU 289)

Prayers of the People

"This Little Light of Mine" (*sing chorus*)

Creator God, we give thanks for your presence here today in this worship, and for the voice that calls within each of us to do your work. We thank you for the ministry of camping and our support of that ministry. We are campers, camp grandmothers and grandfathers, camp nurses, financial supporters, board members, fundraisers, chaplains, leaders, and so much more. Thank you for all who work in this ministry that calls us so deeply and profoundly.

"This Little Light of Mine" (*sing chorus*)

We ask for your continued presence within all creation:

- for those around this world who suffer the devastation of war
- for those around this world and in our community for whom the day started in hunger
- for those who grieve loved ones and started this day wishing they could turn back the clock
- for those who are lonely and heavy-burdened, may your breath, foundation, abundant love, and faith fill their hearts

"This Little Light of Mine" (*sing chorus*)

We ask for your continued presence in our lives as we share our deepest prayers with you in silence now....

We see your presence, God, in the laughter of your people; in the ability to work together; in the meals we share with one another; in the beauty of the sunrise and sunset; in the tears as we are challenged day by day; in the skits, the dances, and the things we make. You have gathered us around the fire to share our faith with one another. Let us join together as our ancestors were taught by Jesus to say:

Lord's Prayer

Leader: We are all connected. We come as one around the fire and are gathered together as many in true community and family. In celebration of all that is creation, and all that beckons us to hear God's voice anew, let us share with one another the fruits of our labour. The offering will now be received.

Offering

Offertory Hymn

"For the Gift of Creation" (VU 538)

Prayer after the Offering

Gracious God, we give thanks for your presence in our lives and in our church. Thank you for the places that remind us of your call, and may these gifts be used to further your work in the world. In the name of the one who often sought the wilderness to talk to you. Amen.

Gift Ritual

(Invite people to come forward and receive a gift—a rock, a shell, a candle, a feather—whatever element they are most drawn to. This will be a reminder that we are all called to this ministry.)

Hymn

"Isaiah 55 (You Shall Go Out with Joy)" (VU pg. 884) *(Sing this two times or more as people come forward to receive their symbol.)*

Leader: Take this gift as a reminder that camp is a gift to us and to the church at large. The stillness of the morning air; the sureness of the earth as our foundation; the joy of the lake, river, or ocean; and the warmth of community found around the fire are all gifts that we receive from United Church camps. With this symbol, go into the world knowing that you are called to still the chaos in your life, and that God provides many resources with which you can achieve that stillness. For that is the good news from the wilderness: we are loved beyond all measure and are provided with all we spiritually need every day on this planet. Thanks be to God!

Benediction

As we leave this place of worship, may our spirit be renewed as we breathe the fresh air, as we walk across this earth hand in hand, as the cool water nourishes us, and as we feel the warmth of God's love. Let us go out into the world and share the gift and ministry of camp with others, knowing that we are not alone! Amen.

Hymn

"Go Now in Peace" (VU 964) (*We encourage you to sing it faster than you might normally.*)

*This liturgy was written by **Karen Bridges** and **Shauna Gibbons**, who are staff associates in Youth Ministry in Alberta Northwest Conference at Riverbend United Church and Robertson-Wesley United Church respectively. They are also the co-founders of Jubilee Productions, which writes and produces spiritual plays and provides workshops on "The creative arts in worship." If you would like to know more, visit their website at www.jubileeproductions.com.*