



FOR THE  
*Beauty*  
OF THE  
*Earth*

DAILY DEVOTIONS  
EXPLORING CREATION

# *For the Beauty of the Earth*

For the beauty of the earth,  
for the beauty of the skies,  
for the love which from our birth  
over and around us lies;  
Christ our God, to thee we raise  
this our hymn of grateful praise.

For the beauty of each hour  
of the day and of the night,  
hill and vale, and tree and flower,  
sun and moon, and stars of light;  
Christ our God, to thee we raise  
this our hymn of grateful praise.

Words by Folliot Sandford Pierpont (1835-1917)

*The 1982 Hymnal, #416*

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# Foreword

The watercolor paintings by Kathrin Burleson and the soul-deep meditations by talented and faithful writers from across the country serve as guides through the wonder of creation. We become witnesses to love in action—flowing colors, winking stars, myriad beasts and blooms, and a garden full of flowers, fruit, trees, and a new miracle under every leaf. This is more than just a book of devotions and pretty paintings—this book is a companion as you rediscover the wonder of creation in God’s garden and in your own heart.

Kathrin’s watercolors begin each month, along with a short explanation of her process of artistic creation. We asked authors to be inspired by scripture, by the paintings, and by the marvelous and miraculous sights and sounds of the earth and skies.

A labor of love, our daybooks provide a daily devotional practice much in keeping with the voice and rhythm of other offerings from Forward Movement, including our flagship resource, *Forward Day by Day*. Our annual daybooks allow us to share the voices of more writers and provide an opportunity to sit with a particular biblical story or concept for a longer period of time. We could think of no better place to spend the next year than with God and in the garden—to fall in love with creation and the Creator.

**Rachel Jones & Richelle Thompson**  
Editors, Cincinnati, Ohio

# *Introduction*

## Artist's Note

Creation is a big subject—huge. Not surprisingly, people approach the story of how the world and all of us came to be from many directions—scientifically, scripturally, literally, mystically. Regardless of which perspective we use to try to understand creation, we are an integral part of it. Odds are that if you are reading this book and embarking on a journey through a new year with these devotions as a companion, you probably figure God into your attempts to glimpse the wonder of creation. I know I do, even when I'm not consciously aware of it.

The paintings featured in this book were completed over the span of a couple of years. I had just finished a series of paintings based on the I Am statements of Jesus as found in the Gospel of John. In those statements we see Jesus through the lens of metaphor, where the ordinary stuff of life is amplified and points to something beyond. After immersing myself in those images over several months, I took a break from watercolors to let ideas simmer without any particular direction or prompting. It wasn't long before Genesis spoke to me and became my primary focus and interest. In retrospect, I see this was the logical next step. In both cases, something knowable and tangible leads us to the ineffable.

There are two creation stories in the Bible; both are found in the first two chapters of Genesis and amount to just a few pages. Who would have thought the expanse of creation could be conveyed in so few words?

My relationship to the creation story isn't hinged to a literal understanding. Like much of my reading of the Bible, I see the stories of creation as true in their very deepest senses—they are true as revelations of the divine to humankind, not scientific or empirically provable, but

absolutely true nevertheless. The relationship of the creation story to science is fascinating and worthy of study, but that is a topic for other writers and other books. This book is an exploration of the relationship of the story of creation to the lives of each of us who take time to ponder and wonder, or as *The Book of Common Prayer* implores us, to read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest.

Initially, I thought I would do a painting for each day of creation, but I soon realized that wasn't going to be enough. The description of the first day alone inspired six paintings—and this was just a hint of the richness of inspiration that lay ahead. Painting the early, abstract concepts of creation was both challenging and enjoyable. It was a time to let the watercolor do much of the work—in other words, to let go of control, allow the pigment to react with water and paper, and see what would happen. I wonder if that's what God did—or does: Put elements together and see what happens.

Much of this process of artistic creation has been a dance between observing, letting things happen, and taking control—making choices and then letting the results of those choices play out. The choices have been big and small, from deciding which pigments to use or how much water to add (this sounds pretty elementary, but it really does matter) to resisting the urge to control the paint. Ultimately these paintings developed in a detached yet fully committed relationship with the process. In that respect, this project is a lot like life.

When I started to paint the third day of creation, I faced another big challenge. How could I possibly choose which plants or animals to paint? Creation is, to put it mildly, vast. I needed a strategy. As I leaned against the door of my studio, gazing out on the bluff and pondering (I do this a lot when I am stuck on a painting), an approach came to me. And it was so obvious. I would paint creation in my little corner of the world, the ecosystem where I live.

I took some artistic liberties with this strategy—I couldn't resist including animals encountered during my travels to Africa, but the bulk of this body of work features plants and animals found in coastal Northern California. The blessing in this approach was being able to really see and appreciate

some of these animals for the first time—and in many cases, do a bit of a reframe in order to see them in a different light. Mice are an ongoing problem in my basement, raccoons desecrate my potted plants and raid my apple orchard, and the deer dine (uninvited) in my garden. Ditto the rabbits. But I made an effort to see them from a new perspective. It is a bit of a stretch to say that I now see all of them as God's precious creatures *all of the time*—the battle over territory still rages, but in painting and spending time understanding them, I warmed up to these creatures. And I've given up on trying to grow a vegetable garden.

But I haven't given up on trying to make sense of creation. And thankfully, God hasn't given up on us either. Forward Movement has assembled a group of gifted and inspired writers to provide daily devotions as companions for the year, and I look forward to sharing the journey with all of you. With each illustration, I offer a few brief words about how God inspired my process of creating—and how God continues to inspire me with the amazing gifts of all of creation.

May God bless you as you live and participate in the miraculous unfolding of creation.

**Kathrin Burleson**  
Artist, Trinidad, California

# April

## A River Flows

*A river flows out of Eden to water the garden, and from there it divides and becomes four branches. The name of the first is Pishon; it is the one that flows around the whole land of Havilah, where there is gold.*

Genesis 2:10-11

**Artist's Note:** Once Genesis starts describing places and geography, the paintings needed to make the transition from conceptual paintings of creation to something more concrete. Formless void and the cosmos are amorphous and indeterminate; a flowing river is something more concrete and literal, so this necessitated yet another shift in approach, from abstract to more realistic. I wanted to invite the viewer in, so I settled on a very simple, stylized painting of a river flowing out of the Garden of Eden, the beginning.



## **That Land is Good**

*And the gold of that land is good; bdellium and onyx stone are there. The name of the second river is Gihon; it is the one that flows around the whole land of Cush. The name of the third river is Tigris, which flows east of Assyria. And the fourth river is the Euphrates.*

**Genesis 2:12-14**

**Artist's Note:** Paintings rarely develop in a straight line. More often than not, the process involves a few twists and turns, kind of like rivers. When meditating on this scripture, I was drawn to two very different approaches. The first line, "And the gold of that land is good: bdellium and onyx stone," introduces some compelling elements. I foiled around with related imagery, but it just felt too static. Once I finally started painting a landscape, I found that I really enjoyed it even though I've avoided them for years. Now that spring is here and the rains have pretty much stopped, I'm looking forward to getting outside and painting. Who knows where that will lead? Oh, the gold we find when we accept a challenge and face our fears!





*April 1*

**This week's author**  
*Nicholas Knisely*

*A river flows out of Eden to water the garden, and from there it divides and becomes four branches. The name of the first is Pishon; it is the one that flows around the whole land of Havilah, where there is gold.*

**Genesis 2:10-11**

The images found in the first two chapters of Genesis are rich and meaty with multiple meanings. It's hard to imagine this is an accident. Reading these words and contemplating on the responses they evoke in us can bring us closer to the author, closer to our community, and closer to God.

This verse opens with an image of division that separates the primordial river flowing out of Eden into four branches, which flow out into the furthest reaches of creation. Why does the account specify that there are four branches? Is it related to some deeper mystical meaning? Is it a memory of some historical geography? Saint Ambrose imagined that the number four corresponded to the four cardinal virtues: prudence, temperance, justice, and fortitude. Saint Cyprian of Carthage thought they represented the four gospels.

To me, the four rivers evoke the four cardinal directions: north, east, south, and west. From this perspective, we are invited to open our thinking outward from Eden, which is at the center, toward the rest of God's work and design. The four rivers also make me think of the three dimensions of classical space and that of time, so that they represent the entirety of the universe as we have known it from the beginning—and mark out every moment of history, every event and instant.

This last idea is the most evocative for me in our twenty-first century context. It reminds me that the origin of all experience and the unfolding of God's plan for creation is the Garden that God created for us to inhabit. We have departed from the Garden, but we remember and long to return.

## April 2

In my experience, great rivers are created when small rivers and tributaries add their currents and water to that of another river. Think about how the Mississippi River is made greater as the Missouri and the Ohio rivers are added to the Mississippi as it flows south to the Gulf. Or consider the Amazon, as the Purus and the Madeira and the hundreds of other streams combine to make one great, majestic current.

But in the Garden, the situation is reversed. Here, the great river flowing outward from the navel of creation divides into four. I'm reminded of how rivers like the Nile or the Mississippi break out into thousands of smaller streams as they make their final push through a delta into the sea. But I don't think that's the image this part of the creation account is meant to evoke in us. This is different—this is a great river dividing into four great rivers, each with their own story.

This reversal seems more about connection and unity than it is about division. We are asked to recognize that all the great rivers of the earth are expressions, children of the water that God creates to water the Garden. If we could, we would travel up the waters of the rivers of creation, to find the places where they rejoined one another, and following on, we would find the center.

Looking at these verses in this light invites us to see the underlying unity of the world that God has made: a world where all waters spring from the same source and are available to everyone. The waters of the rivers in the account are one, just as we all come from the same source and are all one family.

## April 3

Scholars are divided on the location of the river Pishon. Other rivers mentioned in this passage are commonly understood to represent the Tigris and the Euphrates rivers, so it's reasonable to imagine that the Pishon isn't a metaphor. Likely we have forgotten that a river was once named as such. We have either lost track of the name, or the river itself has vanished. Either way, the Pishon has become lost to us today.

Technically a lost river is one that loses water as it flows toward its mouth. Such rivers are not uncommon in the deserts of the Southwest. These lost rivers dwindle as their waters are diverted into reservoirs or spread out into irrigated fields. Sometimes, all that is left is a dry bank that only runs with water once a decade or so when mighty rains restore it to its former glory and intention.

The Pishon is lost to us in time—it flowed and watered a great land once upon a time but does so no longer. A river such as this invites me to wonder what other gifts God blesses us with that we have lost over time. What gifts have become the lost rivers in our lives?

When you encounter a lost river in the Southwest, you can find living, flowing water if you journey (make a pilgrimage) back toward the source. The pilgrimage restores us to that which has been lost. How is God inviting you to seek the wellspring of waters today?

