



Nature Connects Us to God

(Submitted by Pat Michalik)

Learn to use your **5 senses** to explore nature and seek God, and then share your newfound peace with others.

Time spent outdoors can strengthen our faith and reveal a deeper meaning in our daily life. God equipped us with five senses to help us discover and better appreciate the natural world – it's up to us

to step outside, engage and explore.

Few could say they've experienced this more than Jack Layfield. In 2019, at age 67, Layfield served as a chaplain on the Appalachian Trail, hiking 2,192 miles through 14 states in 6 months. Layfield's unique perspective opens the way for all of us to understand how nature can be a balm for our soul and an invitation to reflect.

"In everyday living in our world, all five of our senses are bombarded. We just have so much coming to us 24/7," says Layfield. Being intentional about spending time in nature, and paying attention while we are there, can help us find peace.

Look: "At a young age I knew that God had created [nature], from the very little things that we see to the great, majestic things," shares Layfield. "That was one of the things that was so good about the [Appalachian Trail]. There were the tiniest of wildflowers, the tiniest of little creatures. But then also there were the mountains with beautiful vistas when you reached the top."

Put it into practice: Go outside or gaze out of your window. What's the smallest thing you see? The biggest? Take a moment to marvel at God's creativity and your own place in creation.

Read Scripture: Psalm 96:11-12

Whether you have use of all five senses or just one, or if time spent at your window is the safest way for you to experience nature, God invites you to use any and all of your innate gifts to encounter the beauty of creation.

Hear: When people ask Layfield why he hiked the trail, he answers, "I love being out in nature, I love enjoying God's creation. But the other reason is, after a while, I was able to experience the quietness of the trail, where I'm not bombarded by sounds. I felt like I could hear God speaking to me."

Put it into practice: Layfield begins each day by sitting on his back porch, listening to the birds and soaking in the quiet stillness of the morning. Try this for yourself one day this week. Bring along your cup of coffee and a Bible.

Read Scripture: John 10:27-30

Taste: "On the trail, I had ramen noodles almost every night," mentions Layfield. "And people say to me, 'How did you eat that day after day?' I can't really say it tasted bad. I always looked forward to it. I think being outdoors, in nature, it enhances the taste somehow. That's not a scientific thing, but for me, I think it has."

Put it into practice: Pack a simple snack or meal and find a picnic spot. Eat slowly, with intention, and savor each bite. Give thanks for your surroundings, the food and anyone who might be with you.

Read Scripture: Psalm 23

Hike alongside Jack Layfield

After his Appalachian Trail through-hike was complete, Layfield wrote more than 160 devotions and gathered them in a book, "On the Trail with Chappy Jack: Devotions for the Path You're On."

"I never had that aspiration [to write a book]. I felt like the Lord was speaking to my heart to do that," Layfield says. Each entry offers a story from Layfield's hiking adventures, as well as a Scripture reading, reflection and prayer.

Layfield, a retired mental health therapist, served through the Appalachian Trail Chaplaincy, an initiative of the Holston Conference of The United Methodist Church. Each year, a new chaplain hits the trail to build relationships and share the love of God with everyone they meet. All proceeds from Layfield's book benefit the ongoing ministry, which was established in 2013.

Smell: "The things that we smell, we really don't notice them unless it's something really outstanding, like an apple pie baking in the oven." Layfield says. "On the trail, after hikers had been hiking for 2, 3 or 4 months, there was a phenomenon that we'd be hiking and a day hiker would be coming the other way, and as they were at least 20 feet away, we could smell that hiker. It was a pleasant, usually soapy smell."

Put it into practice: Sit outside for several minutes and close your eyes. Take a few deep breaths. What do you smell? Try to identify more than one scent. Remember that from this earth, God created you.

Read Scripture: 2 Corinthians 2:14-17

Touch: "I have a little garden and I like digging in the dirt... I don't know why people that garden do. Maybe there's something about it that brings us all back into touch with what we once were," suggests Layfield. "Maybe it all goes back to the Garden of Eden. I guess all of this maybe does."

Put it into practice: Plant a seed. Hold the dirt. Get muddy. Care for your new plant over time and touch the leaves once they sprout. Think about the growth cycle and how you might emulate it in your spiritual life.

Read Scripture: Genesis 1:9-12

Take the Creator's peace to others

Layfield remembers many acts of kindness along the trail. A woman offered him a ride in spite of his smelly, dirty appearance. Someone left thermoses of hot coffee and donuts for people to find as they hiked through the snow. A stranger took Layfield and a fellow hiker out to dinner.

He says, "There were people like that all along the way. It's just amazing."

Put it into practice: As creations of God, we are called to care for the earth and for each other. After you've found peace in nature, it's time to share it. How will you do this? Host a picnic in your neighborhood or teach a young person the benefits of unplugging from technology, perhaps. Consider the endless possibilities and choose one that will bring the light of Christ to those around you.

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