

First Churches, Northampton, Discussion Guide to *Grounded: Finding God in the World—A Spiritual Revolution*

This five-week study plan was developed by Rev. Todd Weir for use at First Churches UCC/ABC in Northampton, Massachusetts.

A 5-Week Reading Plan

Week 1: Read Genesis, pages 1-30

Week 2: Read Chapters on Dirt and Water, pages 31-96

Week 3: Read Chapter on Sky, pages 97-126

Week 4: Read Chapters on Roots and Home, pages 133-193

Week 5: Read Chapters on Neighborhood and Commons, pages 193-266

Genesis

- The beginning of the chapter quotes Wendell Berry, “What we need is here.” Reflect on how this sets the tone for the opening of the book. Why does Bass believe this?
- Bass’s central question in the book is “Where is God?” Reflect on where God is from your view. What unresolved thoughts or feelings do you have about where God is?
- Discuss your views on the phrase “God with us” or “God within us.” How does a “God with us” faith impact your daily life? Are there ways you like a God who is in heaven, and separate from human affairs?
- On page 19, Bass writes, “Separating the material from the spiritual is, perhaps, one of the saddest philosophical missteps of Western culture.” In what ways do you agree or disagree with this statement?

In the section on Spiritual Revolution (pp. 19–26) Bass discusses people who are spiritual, but don’t go to a house of worship. Bass writes, “People believe, but they believe differently than they once did.” (p.21) Later she writes, “We are not lazy, self-centered, or individualistic church shoppers. We are heartbroken. Heartbroken by the fact that the faith traditions that raised us and that we love seem to be sleeping through the revolution.” (p. 24) In what ways do you agree or disagree? (And you can do both at the same time!)

Dirt

- What is your own experience with dirt, gardening or growing things? Would you call any of these experiences spiritual? Why or why not?

- Discuss the spiritual impact and implication of thinking about the earth and physical universe as the body of God.
- From pages 50–52, Bass explores the themes of death and resurrection from the perspective of soil. She notes that soil comes from the deaths of many tiny creatures (p. 50) Especially focus on the first paragraph of page 52.
- What is the impact of equating dirt and soil with sin? Would it change anything to increase positive liturgical imagery of soil? (p. 54)
- Would history be different if we had an 11th Commandment to be stewards of the earth? (p.56)
- In what ways have you experienced the soil as healing or as a teacher?

Water

- What is your favorite body of water to visit? What do you experience there?
- In what ways have you experienced being near water as restorative or healing? (see pages 80-81)
- If we think of rivers and fresh water supplies as sacred, and access to clean water as justice, how would this change our worship and mission as a church?

After reading the chapters on Dirt and Water, are you more optimistic or pessimistic about the possibilities of dealing with climate change? Can a shift in theology and spirituality make a difference? What is the church's role in this?

Sky

- Are you a “star gazer” who stays up to see celestial events like eclipses or meteor showers? Describe an event that impacted you and why it was meaningful.
- Jesuit scientist, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin suggested that the cosmos is unfolding in a spiritually purposeful way, toward a human awakening. (p. 107) Discuss the merits of this idea. In what ways might it be true, or what situations seem to negate this?
- Discuss any spiritual practices you have tried that have focused on breath? Why do you think spiritual practices focus on breathing? (p.109-111)
- Do you relate more to the “vertical” or “horizontal” aspects of faith? (p. 118)
- Hildegard of Bingen said “If we fall in love with creation deeper and deeper, we will respond to its endangerment with passion.” Discuss the importance of this quote.

Roots

- How important are your genealogical roots to your sense of well being (on a 1-10 scale)? Identify one important way that your roots matter to you.

- Diana Butler Bass writes, “[We] have forgotten who we are and where we came from. We are nomads in time. . . . So we go about as historical nomads, picking up random names, dates, bits of odd information, souvenirs of the past. But the big picture is gone, save what we reassemble.” (p. 141-142) How true is this and what is the spiritual impact of being nomads? What is the role of church in a nomad society?
- What importance are the genealogies in the Bible? What most surprised you about biblical genealogies? In what ways do our personal and Biblical genealogical research interconnect, or construct our personal narrative?

Home

- Share briefly together about what or where home is for you. How is this related to the question “Where is God?” that is so central to the book, “Grounded?”
- How does “home” relate to “family”? How are they similar and yet different?
- Discuss the importance of “habits” and how they relate to home life. What are your habits that make home real?
- On page 191, DBB writes “God dwells in the world the way a soul dwells in the body.” How does this image work for you? In what way is our home in God?

Neighborhood

- What is your sense of neighborhood? What makes it close or distant? What was the best neighborhood you lived in? Why?
- Compare and contrast the various religions speak of compassion for neighbors on pages 199-201. What are your favorite phrases?
- Karen Armstrong says the Golden Rule “is the best idea humanity has ever had, and it can serve as the unifying ethical insight of compassion.” P. 200 In what ways is this true? What makes it challenging to fulfill in the modern world? How does technology and social media influence your view of “neighbor” and “compassion”?
- On pages 210-214, the author introduces the notion of tribalism. Do you have a “tribe”? What are the strengths and weaknesses of tribes?
- In what ways can you and/or the church create belonging, yet with openness, empathy and hospitality?

Commons

- Where do you experience the life of “The Commons?” What are ways the Church can help re-establish the Commons, both inside and outside the Sanctuary?
- Barbara Ehrenreich writes, “For most people in the world today, the experience of collective ecstasy is likely to be found, if it is found at all, not in a church or at a concert or rally, but at a sports event.” (p.250) In what ways do you agree and

disagree with this statement? What would a “theology of sports” be like? Are there ways to recapture the spirit of *communitas*?

- How might communion include more of a sense of “communing”? What can we learn from other religious forms of communing?
- How do you handle your real fears of things happening in the world? How can fear be transformed into compassion.
- Discuss Karen Armstrong’s quote on p. 260 – “If we don’t manage to implement the Golden Rule globally so we treat all people as though they are as important as ourselves, I doubt we’ll have a viable world to hand on to the next generation.” What is your next step of action to make this more of a reality?

Revelation

- What do you think about the end of the world? Are you more likely to see an apocalyptic, negative ending or the fulfillment of positive ideals and values? Why does the question of the end of the world matter?
- Discuss this quote: “The book of Revelation is not a heavenly escape story. Instead, it tells the opposite tale. We do not go to heaven. Heaven comes to us. The end of history is not destruction; rather, its end is sacred restoration.” (p. 269)
- Discuss possibilities of how the idea of “co-creation” can work in church and in the world? (p. 272-274) How can a congregation foster co-creation both inside and outside the boundaries of church membership? Where are co-creative partnerships available in your community?
- Diana Butler Bass shares how profoundly the attacks on 9/11 challenged her to reshape her faith. Discuss how this trauma has affected your faith, in a personal and communal sense. How do you see the church meeting the challenges of a world that feels “unsafe”?
- On pages 279-280, the author discusses the ideas of Rudolf Otto and Karl Rahner on mysticism. After reading “Grounded” what is your definition of “the holy”? How do you experience God’s presence?

*Thanks to Rev. Todd Weir, First Churches UCC/ABC in Northampton, MA, for sharing this discussion guide. He blogs at bloomingcactus.me. First Churches of Northampton appears on pages 183–184 of *Grounded*.*