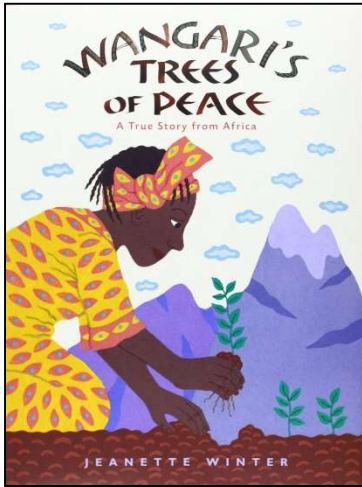


Sunday Storytellers



Wangari's Trees of Peace: A True Story from Africa

By Jeanette Winter

Summary: As a young girl in Kenya, Wangari is surrounded by trees. But when she gets older, she sees the trees being cut down. Wangari is afraid that soon all the forests will be destroyed. So she decides to plant nine seedlings. And as they grow, so do her plans... This true story of Wangari Maathai, environmentalist and winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, is a shining example of how one person's passion, vision and determination can inspire great change.

Welcome! 'Round the room with introductions – does everybody know everybody else?

Introduce the Book – Today's book is a simple, true story about a woman in Kenya, Africa who made a huge difference in her country with a small gesture – by planting saplings – young trees. The story is about this woman [show picture in the Appendix], Wangari Maathai.

Read the Book – Read it “librarian-style” with pictures out. Make sure everyone has had a chance to see the pictures before turning the page.

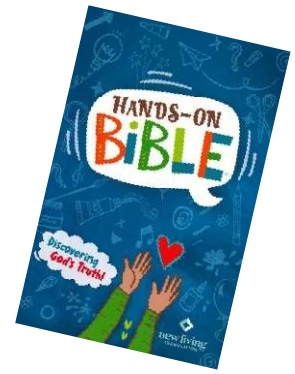
Wondering Questions

- Wangari said she thinks heaven is green. I wonder why she thinks that?
- Can you think of other ordinary people who have changed the world for the better by something they did? Maybe that person is someone you know?
- What small thing could you do that would make a positive difference ...at home ...here in our town/city ...in the world?

Hands-On Bible

The title of this book is “Wangari’s Trees of Peace.” Let’s look for some scripture in the Bible about how to be a peacemaker like Wangari...

[Hand out the Bibles. Go slowly and wait for everyone to catch-up before moving to the next step. Ask older kids to help younger.]



- First, go to the Table of Contents
- Find the book of James listed there – is this book in the Old Testament or New Testament?
- What page does it start on? Let’s all turn to that page.
- Now we’re looking for Chapter 3 – see the blue numbers at the top of the page?
- Now look for verse 18. Who would like to read it? You can also read it if no-one volunteers. (Remember to never force anyone to read out-loud!)

James 3:18

¹⁸ And those who are peacemakers will plant seeds of peace and reap a harvest of righteousness.

[Righteousness – synonyms might be: goodness, virtue, integrity, honor]

Write this pithy verse on your whiteboard or flip chart paper and hang it up in the room! This would also be a good one to print out and collectively decorate as art for your classroom.

Craft – Seeds of Peace Medallions

Collect seeds, beans, and rice, from your pantry but also go to the bulk bins in your grocery store to find more colors and sizes.

Use plastic lids as the “canvas” for the medallion. The kids can line the lid with glue and then start making a design with the seeds.

Seed medallions



Snack suggestions – Sunflower seeds, pumpkin seeds, nuts, granola bars



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Additional Background for Adults –

Here's some background on Wangari and her thoughts on the intersection of religion and environment:



Wangari Maathai
1940 - 2011
2004 Nobel Peace Prize Winner

Heaven Is Green: An Interview with Wangari Maathai
The Nobel Laureate works globally to reanimate our spiritual ties to the natural world, as a means of saving it and ourselves.

2005

Kenyan activist Wangari Maathai is best known as the recipient of the 2004 Nobel Peace Prize for her work to protect the environment, promote democracy, and ensure sustainable development in Africa. A former university professor of veterinary anatomy, Maathai founded the Green Belt Movement in 1977 by planting seven trees at a public park in downtown Nairobi. Since then, she and thousands of rural women (and some men) have planted more than 30 million trees. In the process, women have

earned much-needed income from their seedlings and created a ready source of firewood, fodder, building material, and even food (from fruit trees) that they control. Many of these women have gained confidence and a greater voice in their families and communities.

In 2002, Maathai was elected to Kenya's Parliament. She also currently serves as Assistant Environment Minister in the government of Mwai Kibaki. What is perhaps less well-known is that she was educated at mission schools by Catholic nuns (first Italian and then Irish), and earned a scholarship to study at Mt. St. Scholastica College in Atchison, Kansas (now Benedictine College). There, she picked up a degree in biology and what she calls her "Kansas accent."

Maathai, 65, remains a practicing Catholic while drawing on the tenets of other faiths and the religious expression of her community, the Kikuyu (one of Kenya's ethnic groups or "micro-nations," a term Maathai prefers). The Kikuyus' spiritual home, Mount Kenya, literally Kenya's highest mountain, looms large over the valleys of the central highlands. Under its shadow, Maathai planted a celebratory tree last fall when her Nobel Prize was announced. She spoke recently with writer Mia MacDonald for [Beliefnet](#).

How would you describe your spiritual life?

I do have faith, and I believe in God. I come from a tradition where God was a given. I would say I am a good student of Jesus Christ. I read the Bible and am inspired by it. I use it a lot in my environmental work. But I also listen to what the Buddhists tell us. I listen to what the Qu'ran tells us about God and life and values, about how we should relate to each other and the environment.

Have your beliefs changed over the years?

When we were young we were very restricted—certainly I was in my teens. When we would go to a Catholic church, we could not sing the Protestant hymns. And in the Protestant church, you could not sing the Catholic hymns. At that time, I felt it was right. Now, it seems very dogmatic and closed. Other religious traditions help you be more broad-based and have a more open mind. I have come to understand and appreciate ecumenism and what the late pope [John Paul II] was trying to do. Often, we are divided not by faith or dogmas or the substance of what we believe, but by issues articulated by individuals. If individuals do not quite agree, we go our separate ways.

Did your spiritual beliefs inform the work you began nearly 30 years for the environment through the Green Belt Movement?

In the course of my work I wasn't really thinking about religion or God specifically. I was dealing with problems as they confronted me. I was responding to [the needs of] rural women. But when you look into my past, there is definitely an influence on the way I think, the way I do things, the way I respond and the way I work to serve people who are in trouble or disadvantaged. That comes from the teachers I spent a lot of my young years with, Catholic nuns. I'm quite sure that the teaching and the example of their lives influenced me to have a strong desire to serve the common good.

What are some of the values that you take from Catholic spiritual traditions you were schooled in?

One of the greatest teachings of Jesus, of course, is to love your neighbor as yourself. Christendom has not followed that commandment very well. We all know the history of people who promoted Christianity but have also been agents of some of the evil practices we know have been carried out against people in the world. It is still a big challenge for those of us who say we are disciples of Christ to follow that commandment. Many missionaries were inspired by the desire to do good by taking to others the message of salvation, the message of Christ, which they believed was the right message. Many sacrificed a lot. My own teachers are a good example. That is a heritage I cherish.

Christianity has sometimes been marred by people who proclaimed they were Christians but did not practice justice. Nevertheless, my teachers gave me a deep sense of justice and fairness that influenced me to work for human rights, and to desire human rights not only for myself but also for other people. Eventually, this made me understand why it is very important to expand that concept of justice to other species.

How have Christian tenets or other ethical teachings helped in your work for the environment, conflict resolution, or as part of the pro-democracy movement in Kenya?

The more I have understood the importance of the environment in our lives and the importance of other species to our own survival, the more I have gone to the Bible to get a message I could share. People in Kenya have become very religious. But, quite often, their Christian beliefs or faith are very shallow, based on a God who has to be feared, a God who will punish in a hail of fire and brimstone, rather than a God who is loving [and] compassionate, a God who has given us a wonderful planet with all the essential things we need, a God in whom we should be rejoicing. I try to show them that God is indeed a good God, a loving God, not a punishing God, and that many of the problems we face in Africa diseases, poverty, hunger are not punishments from that good, loving God, but rather come from our failure to utilize the resources that good, loving God has given us.

How do you use the Bible in your work?

I read the book of Genesis with people. When God was creating the Earth, every day he would look at what he had done and would say, "And that is good." So I ask them, "If you look at your land, the way it is decimated, would God look at that and say, 'It is good?' If God was to look at your rivers when it is raining and see all the good soil he gave you to plant your seeds in the river disappearing, would he say, 'This is good?'" I try to make them read the Bible, that book they read every day, with a new understanding and a new vision so they can see the wisdom embedded in the words.

What is Christianity's relationship with protection of the environment?

Surely the destruction of the environment is the destruction of God's creation. This should be a major concern for the Christian faith and for others who share the same heritage of creation. But unfortunately, the way the Bible was translated, we decided we were put on Earth to exploit, to dominate, to subdue nature. We continue to do exactly that. But with the understanding we have now of the linkages between the environment, the way we govern ourselves and our resources, and the way we can live with each other

in peace in this world, churches and the faithful should be in the forefront. Theologians and religious leaders need to tell their faithful that they must do something for the environment and give them good examples of what they can do. After all, this creation, this biodiversity, is the creation Genesis talks about in the first book.

Have you sought to engage religious leaders in environmental activism?

For the last few years, I have been trying to communicate with leaders of various Christian churches to urge them to bring protection and conservation of the environment into the mainstream of their faith and their teachings. I have been suggesting that Easter Monday could be a very good day for the entire Christendom to plant trees. If we could make that Monday a day of regeneration, revival, of being reborn, of finding salvation by restoring the Earth, it would be a great celebration of Christ's resurrection. After all, Christ was crucified on the cross. In a light touch, I always say, somebody had to go into the forest, cut a tree, and chop it up for Jesus to be crucified. What a great celebration of his conquering [death] it would be if we were to plant trees on Easter Monday in thanksgiving.

I've heard you say you think heaven is green. Do you feel a spiritual connection to trees or forests?

We are all part of nature. I remember something somebody said (it's not my idea) that, except for our energies, which could be the soul, our bodies have sometimes been the trees, the water, or the animals. We don't know what we have been in the past. We are all part of each other; we kind of get recycled. So when we come down to the primary elements, there is actually no difference. When we get into our various species, we look different, but we are still comprised of the same elements. For me, because we really don't understand where did we come from, where we are going, what the purpose of all this is, we look at the trees and the animals and we look at each other. We conclude that there is a pattern that we are very much a part of but that we really don't control. I'm very aware that I cannot live without the green trees. I'm humbled by the understanding that they can do very well without me! I'm also humbled by the fact that they sustain me, and not the other way around.

What gives you the strength to pursue your work?

I'm a very optimistic person. I believe that, "Well, you're here and if you feel overwhelmed, of course you give up. But if you are hopeful you can do something." There are many things people can do. They can plant a tree, they can practice "mottainai," [a Japanese term that encompasses the concepts of recycling, reducing, re-using], they can repair [the Earth]. They can appreciate nature and protect it wherever it is, give it space.

In Japan recently, I heard a story about a hummingbird. There's a huge fire in a forest, and all the animals run out to escape. But the hummingbird stays, flying to and from a nearby river carrying water in its beak to put on the fire. The animals laugh and mock: "What do you think you are doing?" they shout at the bird. "The fire is overwhelming. You can't do anything." The hummingbird replies: "I'm doing what I can." There is always something we can do. By taking action, we can demonstrate our hope. We must have hope and give those who follow us hope. We can do it, but we must start yesterday.