

PRAYER HIKE

PRAYING IN NATURE

AGE RANGE

5-12 years

DURATION

1-4 hours

DURATION: 1 - 4 hours

(can be adapted shorter or longer depending on the length of prayers, the number of stories read, duration of hike, and degree/length of outdoor skill).

SETTING

Nature trail, park, or safe outdoor path. This lesson is designed to be completed fairly close to the community; not necessary to travel to a "pristine" outdoor location.

LESSON GOALS

- Be introduced to powerful stories of saints who prayed outdoors.
- Encounter the awesomeness of God through the beauty of their local communities. Understand the power of nature to point us to the awesomeness of God.
- Identify several species of outdoor plants in their communities.
- Experience how praying outdoors can help the heart feel close to God.
- Awaken and sharpen their sensory awareness and observation skills.
- Be familiar with the names and characteristics of various local plants and animals.
- Learn that practices of observation, wonder, stillness, and prayer can be lived out in their everyday lives.

PREPARATION

- Choose a safe trail with some quiet stretches.
- Be aware of any environmental hazards (heat, snakes, chiggers, etc.) and make sure attendees come prepared with water, proper shoes, first-aid, etc.
- Bring small icons of Christ and the saints whose stories will be covered for the introduction.
- Prepare any of the sensory games that will be used.
- Purchase small children's books (like Potamis Publishing) that are connected to the lesson to hand out to children.
- Leaders should familiarize themselves with a few species of local plants, geological features, birds, etc., that may be encountered on the hike.
- Leaders should read through the provided materials (adapted stories and the prayers) prior to the lesson.



OUTDOOR
ORTHODOXY



LESSON OUTLINE

1. OPENING GATHERING & PRAYER - 10 MINUTES

Location: Open, quiet space close to the trail

What to do:

- Gather and begin with a brief prayer service (5 minutes). It could be a shared Trisagion prayer, or a more specific prayer service (like something adapted from an Akathist service).
 - Orient prayer towards an icon of Christ.
-

2. SAINT STORIES - 10 MINUTES

What to do:

- Direct families to find a comfortable seat.
 - Introduce Sts. Paisios, Seraphim of Sarov, and Melangell. Briefly describe where they are from, what time periods, and how much they loved nature. Show their icons to the children.
 - Read aloud one or more of the short saint life adaptations provided in this curriculum.
 - Use stories to inspire participants, rouse their curiosity, and prepare them for observation and praise.
 - Allow for a short open-ended Q&A after each story.
-

3. WARM-UP GAME - 15 MINUTES

After hearing about saints that were spiritually and sensorily attuned with creation, introduce a few short sensory games as a warm-up for more focused observation on the hike. Stand in a circle and invite participants to expand their own senses by imitating the following set of animals. Adapt to match local animals. Use several or all, depending on attention span.

- **Owl-eyes:** have participants focus on a fixed point in front of them and explore looking with peripheral vision like an owl. Hold your arms in front of you, wiggle your fingers, and slowly expand them out to the side until they are out of sight. Use peripheral vision to observe the minute movements of participants in the circle, as well as colors, shades of light and dark, etc.
- **Deer-ears:** demonstrate cupping hands behind ears to imitate the large ears of deer that can move back and forth to focus sound. Ask children to close their eyes for a minute and silently count the number of different sources of sound they can detect with their enhanced hearing.
- **Raccoon-touch:** have children and parents close their eyes, and pass several pre-collected natural objects around the circle one at a time. After the whole group has explored the items, hide them, discuss how they felt and what they might be before opening eyes and passing them around again. for observation on the hike.

- **Dog-nose:** before the event, prepare one or several 20-foot-long scent trails with an essential oil fragrance that leads to a small prize. Lead participants to the start of the trail and ask them to use their sense of smell to follow it to the end.
- **Fox-walk:** demonstrate walking silently and softly like a fox. Bend your knees and place one foot gently on the ground, toes first, so it can be lifted and put somewhere else if it begins to make a noise. Keep eyes up and practice quietly walking around the circle as a group, or call on individuals to practice fox walking to the other side of the circle.

Encourage participants to try putting all the pieces together, with each sense open and primed for observation on the hike.

4. THE HIKE - TIMING FLEXIBLE

What to do:

- Explain that the goal is to use our senses to notice God's handiwork and draw near to Him in prayer. Set the expectation that the group will stay together for observing and praying along the way.
- Begin with the first prayer prompt from "Walking with St. Paisios" (included in the curriculum), then start walking quietly. Encourage children to use their animal senses (fox-walk, owl-eyes, etc) to take notice of the sights, sounds, colors, and other sensations around them.
- Before sharing the name or information about the species, ask them what they notice, what they wonder, or what the object or sound reminds them of. What would they name this thing based on their observation? Ask more questions than you answer - the name of the thing is the least important part.
- After observing, share the name of the bird, plant, etc. and any interesting discussion points, such as historic or medicinal uses. You may also wish to note plants that have a biblical connection, such as cedar or wheat if you are walking in the Plains region next to a field, etc.
- If you don't know the name of something, enjoy the mystery and invite families to do more research at home!
- In between these identifications, intersperse the "Walking with St. Paisios" outdoor prayer prompts at the appropriate moments from the provided section in this curriculum.

TIPS FOR LEADER

- Hike at a steady, gentle pace with frequent stops for prayer/observation.
- Don't overdo species identification.
- Avoid quickly naming species prior to careful observation. Jumping straight to naming can often discourage curiosity and wonder.
- Keep explanations short and concrete.
- Encourage silence playfully, not punitively. Whisper or point to things without speaking and use your fox-walk!
- Use beauty as a cue for wonder, not distraction.
- Be gentle. Goal = joy in Christ, not outdoor perfection.

5. REST STOP - REFLECTION CONNECTION - 5 MINUTES

What to do:

- Find a scenic spot (stream, overlook, meadow). Use the 'Rest Stop' prayer prompt from St. Paisios.
 - Invite children to sit quietly for 1–2 minutes and reflect on Scripture (e.g., “He leadeth me beside still waters” or “Like a deer desires water”). Explain that contemplating this outdoors is a form of prayer that reflects on the words of Scripture.
 - **Ask:** “How do you feel when you pray like this outdoors? Does it feel different from praying at church, or does it feel the same? How about at home? What specifically IS different or the same?”
-

6. CLOSING REFLECTION & PRAYER

What to do:

Gather in a circle. Complete the final 'Bring Peace Home' prompt from St. Paisios. **Ask:**

- What was your favorite part of the hike?
- Is there a sensory skill you really enjoyed using? Did you notice anything new or unexpected?
- Were you able to feel God’s presence on the hike? Can you describe it?
- Are there ways you could pray like this at home or in church?

Invite participants to find their own special “sit spot” at or near their home where they can be still and silent for nature observation and prayer.

Conclude with a short prayer and a traditional Orthodox dismissal. After dismissal, give children the book “A Taste of Paradise” (Link: https://store.ancientfaith.com/a-taste-of-paradise/?searchid=0&search_query=saint+seraphim+of+sarov) and encourage them to read it with their parents..

OPTIONAL EXTENSIONS

- Give each child a small packet containing paper saint icons, leaves or leaf tracings, children’s books, and other related materials to take home.
- Repeat the hike later in the year to see how nature changes while prayer remains constant.
- Encourage parents to connect this lesson to a saint’s full story (e.g., St. Seraphim of Sarov) for deeper inspiration at home. Also encourage them to read aloud the book “A Taste of Paradise” with their children.

OUTDOOR ORTHODOXY CURRICULUM

ADAPTED SAINT STORIES

ST. SERAPHIM OF SAROV

THE FOREST AS A CHURCH

Hermit of the Russian Forest • 1754–1833

BACKGROUND

St. Seraphim prayed in the forests of Sarov, treating the wilderness as a natural church. Wild animals — including a great brown bear — gathered peacefully near him. He taught, “Acquire the Spirit of peace, and thousands around you will be saved,” seeing nature as a place where the soul could be quiet enough to hear God.

STORY

Long ago in Russia, a gentle monk named Seraphim lived deep in the forest. His home was a tiny wooden hut surrounded by tall pine trees and singing birds. He prayed for hours each day, and even the wild animals came to be near him.

One day, a great brown bear wandered up. Instead of being afraid, St. Seraphim greeted him as a friend. The bear quietly sat while the saint shared bread with him.

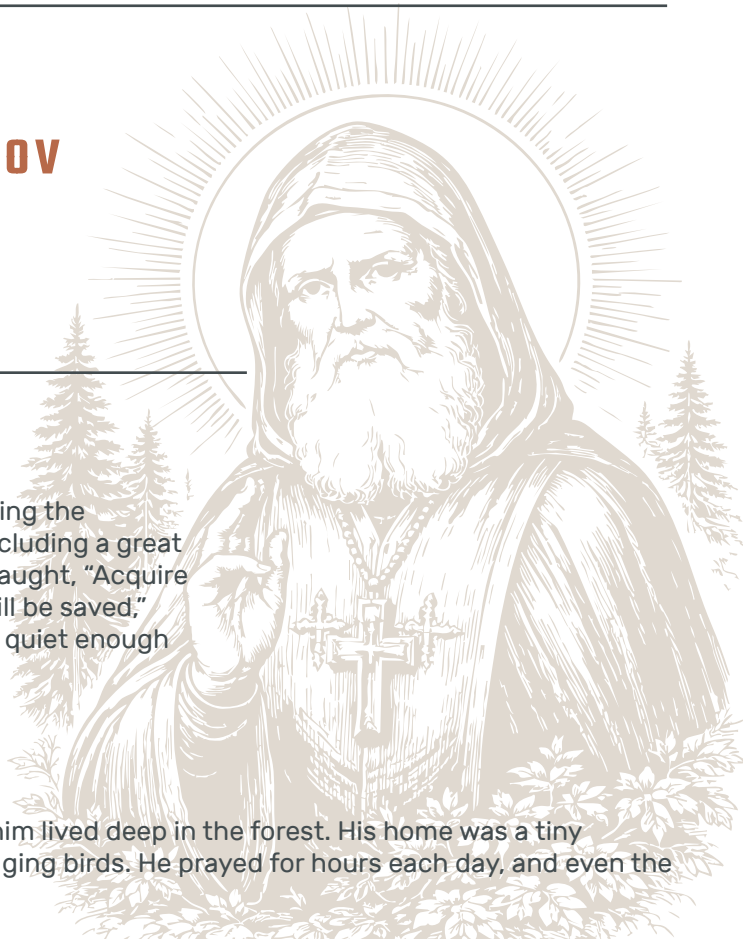
St. Seraphim knew the forest was like a church — full of God’s beauty. When the wind blew through the trees, it was like a hymn. When snow fell silently, it was like the peace of Christ filling the world. He taught people that if they found peace in their hearts, all of creation would feel it as well.

SCRIPTURE

“Be still and know that I am God.” — **Psalm 46:10**

WONDER

When you are very quiet outdoors, what sounds of God’s creation can you hear?
How is God revealing Himself to us in those sights and sounds?



OUTDOOR ORTHODOXY CURRICULUM

ADAPTED SAINT STORIES

ST. HERMAN OF ALASKA

THE ISLAND OF PRAYER

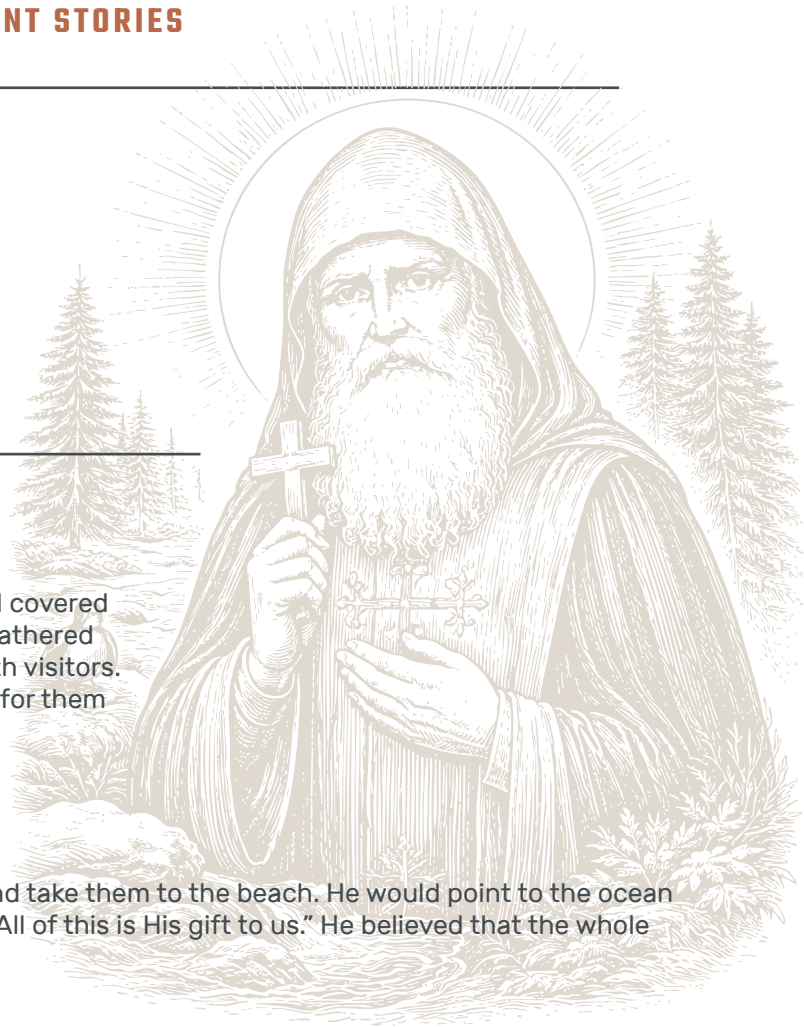
Apostle to America • The Island of Prayer

BACKGROUND

Far away in Alaska, St. Herman lived on a small island covered with spruce trees. He grew vegetables in a garden, gathered water from a spring, and shared whatever he had with visitors. The native Aleut people loved him because he cared for them like a father.

STORY

Sometimes, St. Herman would gather the children and take them to the beach. He would point to the ocean and the mountains and say, "Look how great God is! All of this is His gift to us." He believed that the whole outdoors was a classroom for learning to love God.



SCRIPTURE

"The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it." — **Psalms 24:1**

WONDER

If you were walking with St. Herman today, what place outside would you want to show him?

OUTDOOR ORTHODOXY CURRICULUM

ADAPTED SAINT STORIES

ST. MELANGELL OF WALES

THE HARE WHO FOUND REFUGE

Apostle to America • The Island of Prayer

BACKGROUND

St. Melangell (6th century) prayed in the forests of Wales. A frightened hare once found safety under her cloak, and hunters marveled at her peace. Her woods became a refuge for animals and people.

STORY

In the lush hills of Wales, a holy woman named Melangell lived. She loved to spend her days praying in the forest. One morning, she heard the sound of barking dogs. A small hare ran toward her, eyes wide with fear. Melangell knelt, and the hare hid under her cloak.

When the hunters arrived, their dogs would not touch the hare. The men were amazed and listened to Melangell speak about the God who cares for every creature. From then on, the forest became a safe place for animals and people alike.

SCRIPTURE

"The Lord is good to all; He has compassion on all He has made." — **Psalm 145:9**

WONDER

Can you find a quiet outdoor spot where you could be still enough for an animal to feel safe near you?



WALKING WITH ST. PAISIOS

OUTDOOR PRAYER PROMPTS

AT THE START OF THE HIKE – BEGIN WITH PRAISE

“Thank God for everything you are, everything you have, and everything you achieve.” – St. Paisios

Look for: Something beautiful right where you are – a cloud, flower, or sunlight.

Pray: “Thank You, Lord, for this day and for bringing me here.”

WHEN YOU SEE FLOWERS – LIFE IS FULL OF FLOWERS

“Be like the bee. If you ask a fly, ‘Are there any flowers in this area?’ it will say, ‘I don’t know about flowers, but over there in that heap of rubbish you can find all the filth you want.’ And it will go on to list all the unclean things it has been to.

Now, if you ask a honeybee, ‘Have you seen any unclean things in this area?’ it will reply, ‘Unclean things? No, I have not seen any; the place here is full of the most fragrant flowers.’ And it will go on to name all the flowers of the garden or the meadow.

You see, the fly only knows where the unclean things are, while the honeybee knows where the beautiful iris or hyacinth is.” – St. Paisios

Look for: A flower growing nearby, even a tiny one.

Pray: “Lord, help me notice the little flowers and all the small beautiful things You made. Thank You for making the world so full of Your love.”

WHEN YOU HEAR BIRDS SINGING – OLET

“When I call for Olet to come, he brings with him other birds, friends of his, who run right to the food, but Olet comes out of obedience and love. Even when he is hungry, he sits a while with me and forgets food; I remind him. And now that the weather has turned beautiful and he finds bugs to eat, when I call he still comes out of obedience, even though he is full and not bothered by hunger.”
– St. Paisios

Context for Children: St. Paisios had a little bird friend named Olet. Most birds come around only when they are hungry or want food. But Olet was different. When St. Paisios called, Olet came because he loved him and wanted to be with him, not just for the food. Even if Olet had already eaten, he still came when he was called.

Simple Connection: Just like Olet came out of love and obedience, we can learn to listen to God and come to Him, not just when we “need something,” but because we love Him and want to be with Him.

Listen for: Birds calling or singing.

Pray: “Lord, here I am. Help me to do Your will and love You.”

WALKING WITH ST. PAISIOS

OUTDOOR PRAYER PROMPTS

WHEN YOU NOTICE INSECTS OR ANIMALS WORKING – DO MY WORK WELL

"At my kalyvi I not only have birds of the air, but all the animals come here – jackals, hares, ferrets, turtles, lizards, snakes – they get their full from the overflow of my love, and I am satisfied myself when they are satisfied, and all of us together, 'the beasts, the cattle, the birds and the reptiles', 'Praise, Bless, and Worship the Lord.'" – St. Paisios

Context for Children: St. Paisios noticed that all kinds of animals, big and small, common and unusual, came to his home. He took care of them and shared what he had, and when the animals were happy, he was happy too. He saw this as a way of joining in God's work, because taking care of God's creation is one way we can show love and gratitude.

Simple Connection: Just like the birds, turtles, lizards, and even snakes, we can do our work well when we help others and care for the world around us. When we give with love, it makes everyone, including ourselves, feel joyful and close to God.

Look for: Ants carrying food, a bird building a nest, or a squirrel gathering nuts.

Pray: "Lord, show me how to do my work for You with joy."

GOD'S JOY IN THE WORLD AROUND US – THE SHINING WARMTH OF GOD

"Kindness is one of God's many qualities; therefore, it always spreads joy, drives away the clouds, and opens up hearts like the spring sunshine, which makes the earth blossom. It even warms up snakes and takes them out of their cold holes so they, too, can enjoy God's kindness." – St. Paisios

Context for Children: St. Paisios teaches us that kindness is like God's sunshine. Just as sunlight makes flowers grow and warms the earth, kindness spreads joy, brightens people's hearts, and even reaches creatures we might not expect, like snakes!

Feel: The warmth of the sun, the joy of giving, or a gentle breeze as a sign of God's kindness.

Pray: "Lord, help me to be kind like You. Let my kindness warm others' hearts and make the world bloom with joy."

AT A REST STOP – THE PATH TO CHRIST

"When a person takes one step to God, then God makes a thousand steps towards him." – St. Paisios

Look for: The path ahead of you.

Pray: "Lord, guide my steps to walk toward You every day."

WALKING WITH ST. PAISIOS

OUTDOOR PRAYER PROMPTS

AT THE END OF THE HIKE – BRING PEACE HOME

“God wants us, above all, to be happy and to enjoy inner peace...” – St. Paisios

Think about: One thing you saw or heard on the hike that made you feel peaceful.

Pray: “Lord, help me share Your peace with everyone I meet.”

