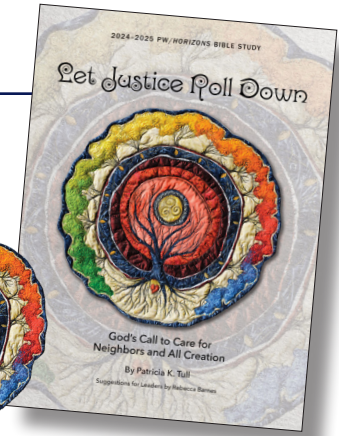
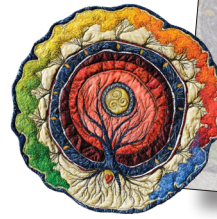




The Slow Hikers Club

BY DR. SARAH LEER

For use with Lesson Nine of the 2024–2025 PW/*Horizons* Bible study, *Let Justice Roll Down: God's Call to Care for Neighbors and All Creation*, by Patricia K. Tull



In the summer of 2024, I set off for a hiking trip with two close friends. Before I tell you more, it is important for you to know that I love hiking. I have hiked in national parks and in small state parks. I have hiked paved trails and rough terrain. I have even tried hiking in the snow and ice (spoiler alert: it did not go smoothly). I am a hiker. However, I am an exceptionally slow hiker. In fact, during my Young Adult Volunteer (YAV) year, some of my fellow YAVs and I who hiked the amazing trails at Ghost Ranch in New Mexico formed the “Slow Hikers Club.”

Which brings me back to my summer 2024 hiking trip to Banff, in Alberta, Canada. I told my friends I am a slow hiker. I will get to the top of the mountain, but it will take me longer than most people. The friends I traveled with are athletes and competitive runners and cyclists. They could have hiked the trail three times as fast as I did. As we set off on the Lake Agnes Tea House trail* above Lake Louise, I kept repeating my slow hiker warning. I started mentally comparing my paces to theirs and started feeling insecure and discouraged. I felt as if I was letting my friends down by being slower on the trail, and in a self-deprecating way, I let them know.

My dear friends reassured me, reminding me that going slow means taking the time to smell the crisp air and admire the moss-covered rocks along the deeply forested path. They reminded me that we were on the journey together.

What is your favorite encounter with nature? How have you been reminded of the interconnectedness of our world?

As we ascended the mountain, climbing 1300 feet in just over two miles, I was disappointed in my progress. But what kept me going, aside from my incredible friends, was the diversity of people along the trail. It's a popular trail, especially in the summer. Throughout the entire journey, step by step, I encountered people from all walks of life. I saw young adults helping their elders. I heard pop songs with Arabic lyrics blasting from a phone carried by the group in front of me. I saw parents in their twenties carrying babies and young children on their backs. I heard languages from all over the world.

It felt as if everyone had traveled from near and far in order to experience the mountain together. When we finally got to the Tea House (yes, I made it), we enjoyed our cup of tea, 7,000 feet in the air next to a couple from Germany with their one-year-old.

What experiences have you had where you've found yourself in a diverse group? What perspective(s) did you gain from those you encountered?

Journeys up a mountain are a common theme in scripture. Some days the mountains are larger than others. As a hiker and a theologian, the connection between a journey and growth feels like an easy connection to make. Following God, being awestruck by creation, encountering different people and honoring other cultures—these are all things I encountered on the trail that day, but they are also ancient themes.

As the prophet Micah writes

Peoples shall stream to
[the mountain of the LORD's house],
and many nations shall come and say:
"Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,
to the house of the God of Jacob;
that he may teach us his ways
and that we may walk in his paths." (Mic.4:1–2)

That day in Banff, it certainly felt as if the world, people of many nations, had come to ascend the mountain together.

We must cherish this world and be good stewards of its resources while simultaneously acknowledging that we inhabit a small part of it. I know solutions to climate change and world peace cannot be found hiking two miles on a snowy mountaintop in the Canadian Rockies. But maybe we can take time to look around at the other people we encounter as we follow God's path.

In *Let Justice Roll Down*, Patricia K. Tull says, "We seek a world in which everyone has what they need in order to eat, drink, find shelter, breathe, work, play, and raise children" (99). Which of these needs do you feel called to help secure for others? What could your first actions be?

Maybe we can listen to the musicality of the languages spoken around us as we go about our daily errands. Maybe we can be kinder to the people we get frustrated with, remembering we don't know everyone's story. Maybe we can enjoy a slower pace and appreciate the beauty of God's creation around us.

Most of us are doing our best, day in and day out. We face challenges and joys as we journey through life. When we are discouraged, when we think we cannot move forward, we must focus on the fact that we are but one of many peoples on this journey. We are just finding our way along the path.

Dr. Sarah Leer (she/her) is a native Arkansan, lifelong Presbyterian, and practical theologian who is living into her call to seek liberation, justice, and belonging in solidarity with those living on the margins.

Notes

- * Phoebe Smith. "Tea House Hike." BBC. December 4, 2023; [bbc.com/travel/article/20231203-tea-house-hike-a-tiny-tasty-secret-deep-in-the-canadian-rockies](https://www.bbc.com/travel/article/20231203-tea-house-hike-a-tiny-tasty-secret-deep-in-the-canadian-rockies).