

Not Ordinary Church

Tenebrae for Creation

Allyson Sawtell, 1/2/20

Opening *Read by worship leader*

The journey through Holy Week is an ancient story. The context in which this all took place was not merely of shadow, betrayal, and grief – but also of community and acts of love. They gathered at the Last Supper, and they gathered at the foot of the cross. So, too, with us. We gather in the impending shadow, and we gather around the Table, in acts of community, grief, and love.

While we will use some of the traditional scripture readings about the events of Holy Week, we're going to enter into the story through the lens of the betrayal and devastation of Creation. In that context, we will extinguish candles as we move through the service, and will re-light a small candle towards the end. As we extinguish each candle, we will have a few moments of silence.

Communion has traditionally been part of the Tenebrae service. Tonight, it is the context and setting for our service. We will begin with the sharing of the bread, and end the service with the sharing of the cup. Our participation, confession, grief, and prayers for Creation's pain are held within the embrace of bread for the journey and the cup of a new covenant, a new way to be.

Let us begin.

Song **Come and Fill Our Hearts with Your Peace** *Taizé*
(repeat the song several times – see notes below)

Silence

The Sacrament of Communion Begins

Mark 14: 22

While they were eating, he took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to them, and said, "Take; this is my body."

Communion Prayer

Created and led by pastor

Sharing of the Bread

Pastor/Worship Leader says: The bread of life, bread for the journey

Song **Stay With Me** *Taizé*
(repeat the song several times – see notes below)

Silence

Tenebrae for Creation

The Betrayal – Matthew 26:20-23

When it was evening, he took his place with the twelve disciples; and while they were eating, he said, "Truly, I tell you, one of you will betray me." And they became greatly distressed, and began to say to him one after another, "Surely not I, Lord?" He answered, "The one who has dipped his hand into the bowl with me, will betray me."

Betrayal

Is it I, Lord? Surely not I, Lord?

The one dipping his hand in the dish with me.

But weren't they all doing that at some point?

Aren't we all?

Is it I, Lord?

Betrayal comes in many forms –

Brazen action

Silence

Succumbing to fear or the power of greed

Consumerism

Rampant individuality with little thought for the common good

Business as Usual

Is it I, Lord?

A candle is extinguished**Silence*****We Knew***

With each species going extinct, a light is extinguished. With each glacier disappearing, a light is extinguished. With each child stunted by lead poisoning, a light is extinguished. With each transgender and Native American woman murdered and missing, a light is extinguished. With each river run dry, a light is extinguished. The list goes on. And Christ is betrayed and crucified in the devastation of God's Creation.

The lights don't simply "go out." They are extinguished: by will, intention, forethought.

Our leaders knew for 50 years that fossil fuels contributed hugely to climate disaster.

We know what is happening. We know what it takes to bring healing. Look to the Okjökull glacier in Iceland, which has lost its status as a glacier. In the summer of 2019, a plaque was placed at its site, which includes the following words:

"Ok is the first Icelandic glacier to lose its status as a glacier. In the next 200 years all our glaciers are expected to follow the same path. This monument is to acknowledge that we know what is happening and what needs to be done. Only you know if we did it."

We knew. We know.

"One of you will betray me," Jesus said.

"One of you will betray me," says Creation, say our grandchildren of all species.

"Is it I, Lord?" we reply, hoping against hope that it's not.

Each light is extinguished.

By our hands and by the hands of those far more powerful than we.

A candle is extinguished

Silence

Song – Kyrie Eleison/God Have Mercy

(tune – “For the Beauty of the Earth”)

Kyrie Ele-i-son. God have mercy on us.

Christe Ele-i-son. Christ have mercy on us.

Kyrie Ele-i-son. God have mercy on us.

On Care for Our Common Home (Laudato Si’) paragraph 33

Each year sees the disappearance of thousands of plant and animal species which we will never know, which our children will never see, because they have been lost forever. The great majority become extinct for reasons related to human activity. Because of us, thousands of species will no longer give glory to God by their very existence, nor convey their message to us. We have no such right.

Responsive Reading – We Have No Right

Leader:

Fungi, algae, worms
Flamingos, armadillos, wombats
Falcons, alpacas, whales
Do we get to pick and choose?

Everyone: We have no right.

Leader:

The web of life. We pluck the strands and know not what we do.
Glaciers, rainforests, coral reefs
Melting ice, rising waters
Acidification, clear-cutting. Famine.
The web of life. We pluck the strands and know well what we do.

Everyone: We have no right.

A candle is extinguished

Silence

Song – Touch the Early Lightly

(Tune: Tenderness; New Century Hymnal, pg. 569, vs. 2)

We who endanger, who create hunger,
Agents of death for all creatures that live,
We who would foster clouds of disaster –
God of our planet, forestall and forgive!

The Crucifixion – Matthew 27: 45-46, 50

From noon on, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. And about three o’clock, Jesus cried with a loud voice, “Eli, Eli, lema sabachtani?” that is, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” ... Then Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last.

What is it Like?

What is it like to soar over the waters, catching the currents in your wings, the wind in your face, to dive for dinner?

What is it like to leap from rock to rock, sure-footed, breathing in the thin mountain air, your singing kid leaping behind you?

What is it like to roam the forests, searching for another like you,
or to push through the chill waters, seeking a return of your song?

What is it like, to be the last of your kind,
when you slip into your barren den for the final time?

A candle is extinguished**Silence*****Jesus is put in the tomb – Matthew 27:57-60***

When it was evening, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who was also a disciple of Jesus. He went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus; then Pilate ordered it to be given to him. So Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen cloth and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had hewn in the rock. He then rolled a great stone to the door of the tomb and went away.

Tomb-Time

Flowers peeking out in early spring's warm sun

Then comes frost and snow

Flowers, minus some greenery, again peeking out in late spring

Oh look – a hailstorm

In the aftermath – eventually, surprisingly – some return and begin to bud.

The question is, at what point will they not come back?

What happens when hope dies, and the light goes out in your heart?
Creation's hope is dying; the light is fading from the heart of all life.

This is where words stop, logic fails, and nothing makes sense.

Let it go. Lie down in the cold and dark for a time.

All that is disappearing is worthy of this grief.

This is tomb-time.

A candle is extinguished**Silence*****Responsive Prayer of Confession and Lament***

Leader: How does confession embrace all of creation?

Words are so small

Ice so thin it will not move

Tears melting unshed

People: We want to avoid this pain if at all possible but it needs to soak into the parched earth, into the thin layers of cold and despair because it cannot be turned away.

Leader: Like a glacier slowly advancing, the future crawls out in front of us
but wait,
the glacier is retreating, the future is shrinking
we're skating on thin ice.

People: We want to avoid this pain if at all possible but it needs to soak into the parched earth, into the thin layers of cold and despair because it will not be turned away.

All: Oh God of snow and ice, of rain and ocean, of tears and barren ground,
we face the rising oceans and the melting ice with fear, grief, anger, helplessness.

We seek the comfort of denial and Business as Usual,
and we know that is not the answer.

So we confess, together.

We confess that the workings of our institutions and systems,
the use of our own power,
the choices we make,
the actions we take – or do not take –
contribute to the devastation of all you love.

O God of hope and healing –

Words are not enough.

Thoughts and prayers are not enough.

We need to change as a country, as a species
and that terrifies us because we do not know what that looks like or
how to do it.

So we watch the glaciers disappear, and feel sad or scared or powerless.

And the future waits for us and seems to shrink

with each flawed system

each misuse of power

each choice

each action or inaction that gives us a way out, a sense of comfort,

a denial of the desperate urgency.

And the future waits for us.

And we try not to hear its cries.

The last candle is extinguished

Silence *A longer silence this time*

A Candle is Lit Again

(Leader lights a small votive candle)

Touch the Wounds of Creation

When we have the courage to admit it, we know that we live in a wounded world.

When we have the courage to do it, we reach and touch the wounds of Creation:

the jutting ribs of the polar bear,
 the ripped stripped skin of the mountains
 our hands immersed in the stream bled dry
 the bleached coral
 the flooded crops
 the flooded neighborhoods
 the melting glaciers.

Extinction.

Take it in; take it on – Creation’s stigmata

Touch the wounds of Creation:

body broken, blood shed: no inner grace, that.
 Without redemption?

Touch the wounds of Creation:

and Creation’s pain touches back,
 reaching into our hearts with fingers of ice, anointing with dust and tears.

What do we do with our grief?

Do we submerge ourselves in the tears and the dust, and find ourselves –
 unthinkingly – simply remaining there?

When we have the courage to feel it,

grief carves out the soul, calling us to confession. And then to change.

When we have the courage to dare it, we begin to imagine,

and we rise from the dust and tears, to claim the improbable vision,
 to begin to do what can’t be done: change hearts and minds,
 and with others, to chip away at the systems that destroy
 to strip their greed bare and starve their power.

And to make something new from the dust and ashes.

When we have the courage to live it,

we engage in the work of redefining

progress the Good Life the Bottom Line what matters who we are.

Touch the wounds of Creation.

There is much that can be healed.

There is courage to be found.

There is redemption to be had.

The Sacrament of Communion Continues

Mark 14:23-24

Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, and all of them drank from it. He said to them, “This is my blood of the new covenant, which is poured out for many.”

Sharing of the Cup,

Pastor/Worship Leader says: This is the cup of the new covenant, a new way to be.

Prayer *Created and led by the pastor*

Sending Forth

Closing Prayer (Unison)

O God of all history, we no longer live in “interesting times”, in crisis times.
We live now in times of dire emergency.

O God of all time, it’s running out.

Get us moving.

Where leaders fail, help us lead in whatever way we can,
with the strengths and gifts you have given us,
and that others have called out from us.

Move your Church to the frontlines of this emergency,

To proclaim and embody hope

To proclaim and embody new definitions of what it means to be a people of progress and
promise

To proclaim and embody a new creation.

In the sure and certain knowledge of your all-encompassing love,
we confess here and now to the damage we have caused Creation.

With great fear and trembling,

we take the steps to proclaim and embody what needs to be done – now –
for the healing of your world and our home.

And we promise.

We promise we will dare to celebrate and love in the midst of all of this.

And we will sing to the future of ice and oceans, earth and sky, healing and peace, which our
children’s children will see,

because we promise to do the work that it will take.

Somehow. Some way.

With you, O God, and your community of life. Amen!

Song – Touch the Earth Lightly vs. 4

God of all living, God of all loving,

God of the seedling, the snow and the sun,

Teach us, deflect us, Christ reconnect us,

Using us gently and making us one.

The congregation leaves in silence

Notes

This service was to be done, for the first time, in my church during Holy Week of 2020. When we had to stop meeting in person due to COVID, and go to Zoom worship, we didn't do this service (I think we used a couple of the readings). I felt it was not appropriate for that year – we were only a few weeks into shut-down and we were grieving those changes and the devastation of the pandemic. If (God forbid!) Holy Week in future years has churches unable to meet in person, this is a service that I don't believe lends itself to Zoom worship very well, unless the worship leaders meet in the sanctuary (masked, 6 feet apart) and do the candle-extinguishing from that space.

It is suggested that before the service, the congregation share a simple meal together of bread and soup (potluck or otherwise), with folks gathered around tables. Then they can remain there for the service. The “decorations” for each table could be small rocks, dishes of soil, leaves, water, a plant, pictures of endangered and threatened species, and pictures of children and grandchildren.

Many of the readings are done by one or two leaders. Others, as marked, are responsive or unison readings with the congregation.

Communion may be done in the tradition of your local congregation, with the officiant creating their own Communion prayers. In the interests of time and less moving around, the serving of the bread, and later the cup, might best be done with people serving each other seated in the pews or around tables, instead of coming forward to the front of the sanctuary or moving to stand in a circle. But each congregation needs to do what works best for them.

There needs to be a central table/altar for Communion, with six candles for the Tenebrae and decorated much as the individual tables are decorated – pictures, items from nature, purple cloths.

The directions printed in red should be removed from text printed in a worship bulletin. You may decide whether or not the longer readings by worship leaders should be printed in the bulletin. You may format the bulletin as you see fit, but please do not change the content of the liturgy.

Scripture readings are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

Poetry and prayers by Rev. Allyson Sawtell – see copyright information at the bottom of this document.

On Care for our Common Home (Laudato Si') – the Encyclical of Pope Francis, 2015

Touch the Earth Lightly – New Century Hymnal, pg. 569 Tune: “Tenderness”

Kyrie/God Have Mercy – Tune “For the Beauty of the Earth”, New Century Hymnal , pg. 28 (adapted by A. Sawtell)

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