
AN EARTH TENEBRAE
A Liturgy for the Vernal Equinox
by Dr. Kenneth Cuthbertson

The following service was created for the Vernal Equinox Earth Vespers at Las Placitas Presbyterian Church, held on St. Cuthbert's Day, March 20, 2006. The inspiration for the service was respectfully to adapt the historic *Tinieblas* or Tenebrae ceremony of northern New Mexico, based on the traditional fourteen stations of the cross, into a reflection on the current environmental crisis and the growing impact of global warming.

The link between the between the *Tinieblas* and the Stations of the Cross is the concept of the "Cosmic Christ" found in the writings of St. Paul, John the Evangelist, and others across the centuries. The notion is simple—that the mystery of Christ includes the description of him as the "first born" of all creation, through whom all things came to be and in whom they consist. The passion of the Christ thus stands as an apt symbol of the spiritual dimension of the ecological crisis. And, the notion of the redemption and resurrection of creation is intimately tied to the visions of the coming realm of God presented in the New Testament.

For this ceremony we used a set of prints of the stations, "The Way of the Cross," by the late Tucson artist Ted DeGrazia. This set includes a fifteenth station, depicting the resurrection. The stations were placed sequentially on three tables around the church hall, with a candle for each station except the fifteenth. As the service proceeded we moved from station to station in turn (table 1, table 2, table 3, back to table 1, and so on—five times around the circle). After each reading, prayer, and chant, the candle for that station was extinguished by the reader. After station 14, the lights in the church hall were all turned off for the period of "holy noise" and silence. Then a lighted candle and flowers (daffodils) were carried in from an adjoining space to symbolize the hope for cosmic resurrection, and the other lights were turned back on.

For those who wish to adapt this material, let me note that as service leader I handled the introductory and concluding parts while pre-selected participants were asked to do the readings for each of the stations and to extinguish the candle at the conclusion of the segment. The readings, which are set forth here in the body of the service and are italicized, were not included in the printed order of service which contained the songs, chants, and unison readings, herein marked "[all]."

I would also note that the two hymns were accompanied by a pueblo-made drum, and no other instruments. The chanting was all *a cappella*. In the text below, songs, chants, and quoted passages are italicized. Sources are given at the end of the text.

—Ken Cuthbertson

Part I
The Passion and the Cosmic Christ

Opening Reading

[Leader] Here are lines from Emily Dickinson.

*A Light exits in Spring
Not present in the Year
At any other period—
When March is scarcely here*

*A Color stands abroad
On Solitary Fields
That Science cannot overtake
But Human Nature feels.*

*It waits upon the Lawn,
It shows upon the furthest Tree
Upon the furthest Slope you know
It almost speaks to you.*

*Then as Horizons step
Or Noons report away
Without the Formula of sound
It passes and we stay—*

*A quality of loss
Affecting our Content
As Trade had suddenly encroached
Upon a Sacrament.*

Gathering Song: "Many and Great O God Are Thy Things"

*Many and great, O God, are Thy things,
Maker of earth and sky;
Thy hands have set the heavens with stars,
Thy fingers spread the mountains and plains.
Lo at Thy word the waters were formed;
Deep seas obey Thy voice.*

*Grant unto us communion with Thee,
Thou star-abiding One;
Come unto us and dwell with us:
With Thee are found the gifts of life.
Bless us with life that has no end,
Eternal life with Thee.*

Reflection

[Leader] As noted by theologian Marcus Borg, beyond the stage of critical thinking there is a "post-critical naivete" that allows us to interact creatively with the sacred stories of our tradition. Taking seriously the texts on the Cosmic nature of the Christ (in *Colossians 1*, *John 1*, etc.), and recalling observations by Dietrich Bonhoeffer to the effect that the ascended Christ is present in a "pan-en-theistic" sense, this liturgy presents reflections on the environmental crisis and humanity's role using the motif of a "cosmic passion." It is keyed to the Stations of the Cross which emerged, appropriately enough, from the Franciscan tradition.

The Prayer of Jesus

[All]
*Eternal Spirit,
Earth Maker,
Pain-bearer, Life-giver
Source of all that is and that shall be,
Father and Mother of all,
Loving God, in whom is heaven:*

*The hallowing of your name echo through the universe!
The way of your justice be followed by the peoples of the world!
Your heavenly will be done by all created beings!
Your commonwealth of peace and freedom sustain our hope and come on
earth.*

*With the bread we need for today, feed us.
In the hurts we absorb from one another, forgive us.
In times of temptation and test, strengthen us.
From trials too great to endure, spare us.
From the grip of all that is evil, free us.*

For you reign in the glory of the power that is love, now and forever.

Amen.

—A New Zealand Prayerbook

Part II The Tenebrae of the Way of the Cosmic Cross

First Station. Jesus is sentenced: Earth in the Balance

[Reader] When Jesus was judged, he was brought before religious leaders and government officials who reacted out of their traditional orthodoxies, self-interest, political expediency, and an impetus to preserve the status quo that protected their privilege. They apparently forgot the bigger picture. We are told that he had come into the world he'd made, and it did not know him.

Please join me in reading the following lines are from the United Nations Environmental Sabbath program.

[All]

We have forgotten who we are.

We have forgotten who we are.

We have alienated ourselves from the unfolding of the cosmos.

We have become estranged from the movements of the earth.

We have turned our backs on the cycles of life.

We have forgotten who we are.

We have sought only our own security.

We have exploited simply for our own ends.

We have distorted our knowledge.

We have abused our power.

We have forgotten who we are.

Now the land is barren.

And the waters are poisoned.

And the air is polluted.

We have forgotten who we are.

Now the forests are dying,

And the creatures are disappearing,

And the humans are despairing.

We have forgotten who we are.

We ask for forgiveness.

We ask for the gift of remembering.

We ask for the strength to change.

We have forgotten who we are.

[Reader] The earth and sky, My God, are stunned, seeing the love that in wanting to save humankind you gave your life, beloved. The innocent one was sentenced in order to free the sinner.

[All] Thus with tender lament, all of us, we pray to you: Hear us. In you, Holy One, we hope. Let us not be confounded, beloved. Cleanse us and purify us. [The first candle is extinguished.]

Chant: *Our darkness is never darkness in thy sight.*
 The deepest night is clear as the daylight.

Second Station. Jesus Takes up the Cross: The Earth is Subjected to Futility

[Reader] Here is a passage from the prophecies of Isaiah:

The earth dries up and withers,

The world languishes and withers;

*The heavens languish together with the earth.
The earth lies polluted under its inhabitants;
For they have transgressed laws
Violated the statutes,
Broken the everlasting covenant.
Therefore a curse devours the earth,
And its inhabitants suffer for their guilt. [Is. 24: 4-6]*

And from Hildegard of Bingen, the 12th century religious leader and mystic:

*The high, the low, all of creation God gives to humankind to use.
If this privilege is misused, God's Justice permits creation to punish
humanity.*

[All] With my cross I am following you, moreso with your grace and favor; for my weakness is great, I shall not be able to finish this step. For your suffering today comfort me. Comfort me by your love. [The second candle is extinguished.]

Chant: *Our darkness is never darkness in thy sight.
The deepest night is clear as the daylight.*

Third Station. Jesus Falls: Environmental Crisis #1

[Reader] This is from an ABC News report, March 2, 2006.

For the first time scientists have confirmed that the earth is melting at both ends, which could have disastrous effects for coastal cities and villages . . . If all the Antarctic ice melted, sea levels would rise by 200 feet . . . Recent studies have confirmed that the North Pole and the South Pole have started melting . . . The warming ocean comes underneath the ice shelves and melts them from the bottom, and warmer air from the top melts them from the top . . . so they're thin and eventually they get to a point where they go poof! James Hansen, director of NASA's Earth Science Research, said that disaster could probably be avoided, but that it would require dramatically cutting emission outputs. If the proper actions aren't taken, Hansen said, the sea level could rise as much as 80 feet by the time today's children reach middle age.

[All] If the weight of my sins makes you fall upon the earth, so your goodness has conquered me. See me here, I am subdued. Do not allow me, my Master, to fall into temptation. [The third candle is extinguished.]

Chant: *Our darkness is never darkness in thy sight.
The deepest night is clear as the daylight.*

Fourth Station. Jesus meets his Mother: Creation and Creator

[Reader] Here is a passage from the essayist Annie Dillard.

*At a certain point you say to the woods, to the sea, to the mountains, the world,
Now I am ready. Now I will stop and be wholly attentive.*

You empty yourself and wait, listening. After a time you hear it: there is nothing there. There is nothing but those things only, those created objects, discrete, growing or holding, or swaying, being rained on or raining, held, flooding or ebbing, standing, or spread.

You feel the world's word as a tension, a hum, a single chorused note everywhere at the same. This is it: this hum is the silence . . .

The silence is all there is. It is the alpha and the omega. It is God's brooding over the face of the waters; it is the blended note of then thousand things, the whine of wings. You take a step in the right direction to pray to this silence, and even to address the prayer to "World." Distinctions blur. Quit your tents. Pray without ceasing.

[All] By the worthiness of your divine passion, that the veil of your love should cover and help me, may your Mother be my guide, for her sorrow inspires me. [The fourth candle is extinguished.]

Chant: *Our darkness is never darkness in thy sight.
The deepest night is clear as the daylight.*

Fifth Station. Simon of Cyrene Carries the Cross: Stewards of Creation?

[Reader] Simon was a pilgrim to Jerusalem, just another bystander who unexpectedly got pulled into the story, bearing the cross for Christ on part of his journey. The following is from 20th century scientist, philosopher, and priest Pierre Teilhard de Chardin.

Sons and daughters of the earth, steep yourself in the sea of matter, bathe in its fiery waters, for it is the source of your life and your youthfulness.

You thought you could do without it because the power of thought has been kindled in you? You hoped that the more thoroughly you rejected the tangible, the closer you would be to spirit: that you would be more divine if you lived in the world of pure thought, or at least more angelic if you fled the corporeal? Well, you were like to have perished of hunger.

You must have oil for your limbs, blood for your veins, water for your soul, the world of reality for your intellect: do you not see that the very law of your own nature makes these a necessity for you?

[All] Help me, Good Jesus, you know my heart, help me to be a Cyrene for you, not the one who failed you. Receive me, my sweet love, to yourself. May it be so. [The fifth candle is extinguished.]

Chant: *Our darkness is never darkness in thy sight.
The deepest night is clear as the daylight.*

Sixth Station. Veronica's Veil—The True Image of Jesus: Earth Manifests the Creator.

[Reader] According to the legend, when Jesus met the woman Veronica along the way to Golgotha, she compassionately blotted the blood and sweat from his face. Afterwards, she discovered that the image of his face was perfectly imprinted on the

cloth. Here is a reading from J. Philip Newell's book, *Listening for the Heartbeat of God*.

In his homilies on the prologue to St. John's Gospel [the ninth-century philosopher and theologian], Eriugena tells us that God is in all things, the essence of life; God has not created everything out of nothing, but out of [God's] own essence, out of [God's] very life. This is the light that is in all things, "the light which is the light of angels, the light of the created universe, the light indeed of all visible and invisible existence." The world, therefore, Eriugena regarded as a theophany, a visible manifestation of God. Even what seems to be without vital movement, like the great rocks of the Earth around us, has within it the light of God. To know the Creator we need only look at the things [the Creator] has created. The way to learn about God, Eriugena believed, is "through the letters of Scripture and through the species of creation." He urges us to listen to these expressions of God and to "conceive their meaning in our souls."

[All] The image of my maker restores me from my sins, but it was redrawn upon a linen cloth with the favor of your face. May it weigh upon my soul, your sorrowful passion. [The sixth candle is extinguished.]

Chant: *Our darkness is never darkness in thy sight.
The deepest night is clear as the daylight.*

Seventh Station. Jesus falls again: Environmental Crisis #2

[Reader] This is from an account published in *National Geographic News* in October, 2005.

A study conducted by scientists in the United State and Italy warned that summers could be a lot hotter in 100 years because of global warming caused by greenhouse gasses. "Summer is likely to be more severely hot everywhere in the U.S.," said Noah Diffenbaugh, an atmospheric scientist at Purdue University who co-authored the study. "In the Southwest, if you imagine the hottest two and a half weeks of the year, you're looking at that becoming three months long. Phoenix will get three months of what is now the hottest two weeks of the year" The weather changes predicted by Diffenbaugh and his colleagues could do more than make summers more uncomfortable. There may be more floods a century from now, and summer heat waves may be much hotter and last much longer. The scientists warn of catastrophic losses of property and human life, as well as exotic diseases, species extinction, and dramatic ecological, economic, and sociological impacts.

[All] Already the second time I see you upon the earth, having fallen. As an ingrate I pull you down with the blows that I give you. Beloved, when I do wrong I deserve your just sentence. [The seventh candle is extinguished.]

Chant: *Our darkness is never darkness in thy sight.
The deepest night is clear as the daylight.*

Eighth Station. Jesus meets the women of Jerusalem: An Ecofeminist Lament

[Reader] Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but for yourselves. Here is yet another passage from the 12th century mystic, Hildegard of Bingen.

Now in the people that were meant to be green, there is no more life of any kind. There is only a shriveled barrenness. The winds are burdened by the utterly awful stink of evil, selfish goings-on. Thunderstorms menace. The air belches out the filthy uncleanness of the peoples. There pours forth an unnatural, a loathsome darkness, that withers the green, and wizens the fruit that was to serve as food for the people. Sometimes this layer of air is full, full of a fog that is the source of many destructive and barren creatures, that destroy and damage the earth, rendering it incapable of sustaining humanity.

[All] I saw a few poor women whose hearts were melted by their sorrow in seeing you suffer. I cannot feel. Am I alive? Do not allow me, O Christ, that I should fall into temptation. [The eighth candle is extinguished.]

Chant: *Our darkness is never darkness in thy sight.
The deepest night is clear as the daylight.*

Ninth Station. Jesus Falls a Third Time: Environmental Crisis #3

[Reader] Here is more from the *National Geographic News*.

Even as the ice caps melt, global warming threatens to leave a billion people high and dry, says a team of U.S. climate scientists. If the Earth warms just a degree or two Celsius in coming decades, regions that depend on runoff from mountain snows for drinking water and farming will face shortages, according to a study published in the November 17 issue of the journal Nature. . . . Less snow falls in a warmer world, and what snow there is melts earlier. . . . The dams get filled earlier in the year, and they can only be filled to a certain level. . . . The result: Much of the early runoff goes to waste, prompting shortages in late summer and autumn. It's like squeezing six months of snowmelt into four. [Estimates are that] by 2050 the western U.S., southern Africa, and even areas surrounding the Mediterranean Sea will receive 10 to 30 percent less runoff than they currently do.

Here is a question for us in New Mexico: What lies in the future for the acequias [*i.e.*, the traditional irrigation ditches] running through this very churchyard?

[All] O how heavy are the sins that take up residence in my God, for three times already he has fallen. Hold me in your holy hands. Enough of sinning, my Master. [The ninth candle is extinguished.]

Chant: *Our darkness is never darkness in thy sight.
The deepest night is clear as the daylight.*

Tenth Station. Jesus is stripped: The Earth Laid Bare

[Reader] Here is a reading from Chapter 8 of the *Revelation of John* portraying environmental collapse as an element of cosmic justice.

When the Lamb opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour. And I saw the seven messengers who stand before God, and seven trumpets were given to them. . . .

The first messenger blew the trumpet, and there came hail and fire, mixed with blood, and they were hurled to the earth; and a third of the earth was burned up, and a third of the trees were burned up, and all green grass was burned up.

The second messenger blew the trumpet, and something like a great mountain, burning with fire, was thrown into the sea. A third of the sea became blood, a third of the living creatures in the sea died, and a third of the ships were destroyed.

The third messenger blew the trumpet, and a great star fell from heaven, blazing like a torch, and it fell on a third of the rivers and on the springs of water. The name of the star is Wormwood. A third of the waters became wormwood, and many died from the water, because it was made bitter.

The fourth messenger blew the trumpet, and a third of the sun was struck, and a third of the moon, and a third of the stars, so that a third of their light was darkened; a third of the day was kept from shining, and likewise the night.

Then I looked, and I heard an eagle crying with a loud voice as it flew in mid-heaven, "Alas, alas, alas, alas for the inhabitants of the earth, at the blasts of the other trumpets that the three messengers are about to blow!"

And here are two contemporary comments. The first is from the radical right-wing pundit Anne Coulter:

God gave us the earth. We have dominion over the plants, the animals, the trees. God said, "Earth is yours. Take it. Rape it. It's yours."

The second comment is from the liberation theologian Father Pablo Richard:

Cosmic agonies of this kind are not "natural" disasters but rather . . . the disastrous results of ecological destruction, the arms race, irrational consumerism, the idolatrous logic of the market, and the irrational use of technology and of natural resources.

[All] Converted into lights, the sky and earth, my God, I see your naked body treated with cruelty. If the innocent one thus pays, what will become of the sinner? [The tenth candle is extinguished.]

Chant: *Our darkness is never darkness in thy sight.
 The deepest night is clear as the daylight.*

Eleventh Station. Jesus is Nailed to the Cross: Earth's Travail

[Reader] "Forgive them, they don't know what they do." In the light of that memorable statement from the cross, here are lines from the late contemporary poet Allen Ginsburg.

*Too much industry
too much eats
too much beer
too much cigarettes*

*Too much philosophy
too many thought forms
not enough rooms—
not enough trees*

*Too much police
too much computers
too much hi-fi
too much Pork*

*Too much coffee
too much smoking
under slate grey roofs
Too much obedience*

*Too many bellies
Too many business suits
Too much paperwork
too many magazines*

*Too much industry
No fish in the Rhine
Lorelei poisoned
Too much embarrassment*

*Too many fatigued
workers on the train
Ghost Jews scream
on the streetcorner*

*Too much old murder
too much white torture
Too much one Stammheim
too many happy Nazis*

*Too many crazy students
Not enough farms
not enough apple trees
Not enough nut trees*

*Too much money
Too many poor
Turks without votes
“Guests” do the work*

*Too much metal
Too much fat
Too many jokes
not enough meditation . . .*

[All] My sins become nails in order to nail you, my God, and with tears I hope this prison should be undone. If I want to share your cross I submit myself at your feet.
[The eleventh candle is extinguished.]

Chant: *Our darkness is never darkness in thy sight.
The deepest night is clear as the daylight.*

Twelfth Station. Lifted up on the Cross, Jesus Dies: Revisiting the Tree of Knowing Good and Evil

[Reader] Here is a portion of the popular version of the historic speech by Chief Seattle upon the occasion of an 1854 land treaty with the United States.

Teach your children what we have taught our children—that the earth is our mother. Whatever befalls the earth befalls the sons and daughters of the earth. If men spit upon the ground, they spit upon themselves.

This we know. The earth does not belong to us; we belong to the earth. This we know. All things are connected like the blood which unites one family. All things are connected.

Whatever befalls the earth befalls the sons and daughters of the earth. We did not weave the web of life; we are merely a strand in it. Whatever we do to the web, we do to ourselves.

[All] My friend and brother, Jesus, with the water and with the blood of your breast you sustain the sinner. If this is what you anxiously desire, I submit myself at your feet. [The twelfth candle is extinguished.]

Chant: *Our darkness is never darkness in thy sight.
The deepest night is clear as the daylight.*

Thirteenth Station. "Pieta"—the Dead Jesus is Laid in Mary's Arms: A Mandala of Compassion

[Reader] The following is from *Prayers to an Evolutionary God* by William Cleary:

*Holy Fire at the Heart of Mystery,
There are losses in life that break our hearts—
Especially if we send out our affections profusely.
Losses come, failure happens,
Energy dissipates and is lost,
Our efforts all in vain at times.
Be near, Holy Wisdom,
And strengthen our hearts if you can,
But above all enable us to befriend the perplexing world we have
Along with all its imperfection, illusion,
And disappointment.
Persuade our hearts to accept the world as it is
And to work for our planet home's survival.
It is the life you have given us for now,
And in your promising presence
We can walk its path responsibly and courageously.
Be with us. Amen.*

[All] The sun dressed in mourning, the earth trembled, the rocks were split when

Jesus expired. What might Mary have felt, when she saw him in her arms? [The thirteenth candle is extinguished.]

Chant: *Our darkness is never darkness in thy sight.
The deepest night is clear as the daylight.*

Fourteenth Station. Jesus is Laid in the Tomb: The "Late, Great Planet Earth"?

[Reader] In the book *Earth Prayers*, from which many of our readings have been taken, the editors, Elizabeth Roberts and Elias Amidon, make these observations.

Today the ability of the Earth to support life is being deeply eroded. The evidence is everywhere. We are mindlessly destroying the very web of life. . . . Within the animal and plant kingdoms we are witnessing the greatest holocaust in history. Millions of species are on the verge of extinction. The old forests are being felled, the top soil washed away, and the groundwater contaminated. The air is polluted and the rain is acid. So the litany goes on, as every aspect of life on the planet is profoundly altered by the way our culture has organized the business of its existence. . . .

While many of us are aware of the destruction taking place in our planet, it is difficult to integrate this knowledge into our daily life. . . . We fear the despair such information provokes. We don't want to feel the grief over all that is lost, nor our own complicity in the damage. . . .

There is a historical tradition of prayer that foresees the ruination of the world because of human transgression. We find it in the [Hebrew Bible], we find it again in the prayers of the Native Americans as they [witnessed] the destruction of their way of life. . . . We are hearing it again now, as citizens from around the world express their fears and their grief at what is happening to the Earth.

[All] Weep, souls, thus you should weep, overcome with grief. The most innocent Mother that bore the best child, handing him over to the grave, he remains in her heart. [The fourteenth candle is extinguished.]

Chant: *Our darkness is never darkness in thy sight.
The deepest night is clear as the daylight.*

[All the lights are now turned off]

[Leader] In the traditional *tinieblas*, a "holy noise" must now ensue in which worshippers bang hymnbooks on the seats, cry out, howl, and so on, to symbolize Jesus breaking the bands of death and the "harrowing of Hell" which liberated the dead. On this night, and for this service, we do this to symbolize the liberation of the earth and of life itself.

[The holy noise is made.]

[Leader] Now let us observe a time of silence."

[Silence is observed.]

Part III
Bringing Back the Light: A Sign of Resurrection and Renewal

[A lighted candle and flowers are now brought into the darkened worship space.]

[Leader] United with the Cosmic Christ, we reaffirm our faith and commitment to care for the Earth with these lines from the United Nations Earth Sabbath program:

[All]

We join with the earth and each other.
To bring new life to the land
To restore the waters
To refresh the air.

We join with the earth and each other.
To renew the forests
To care for the plants
To protect the creatures.

We join with the earth and each other.
To celebrate the seas
To rejoice in the sunlight
To sing the song of the stars.

We join with the earth and each other.
To recreate the human community
To promote justice and peace
To remember our children.

We join with the earth and each other.
We join together as many and diverse expressions
Of one loving mystery: for the healing of the
Earth and the renewal of all life.

[Leader] Here are lines for the Resurrection, from the 13th century mystic Mechtild of Magdeburg.

When your Easter comes I shall be all around you, I shall be through and through you, and I shall steal your body and give you to your Love.

Song: "Morning Has Broken"

*Morning has broken like the first morning,
Blackbird has spoken like the first bird.
Praise for the singing! Praise for the morning!
Praise for them, springing fresh from the Word!*

*Sweet the rain's new fall sunlit from heaven,
Like the first dewfall on the first grass.
Praise for the sweetness of the wet garden,
Sprung in completeness where God's feet pass.*

*Mine is the sunlight! Mine is the morning
Born of the one light Eden saw play!
Praise with elation, praise every morning,
God's re-creation of the new day!*

—Eleanor Farjeon

[Words of dismissal]

[Leader]The season of the Vernal Equinox, when the Earth stands balanced between prevailing darkness and prevailing light, was the time when many ancient traditions honored a dying and rising god. In this season of Lent we recall the observation of C.S. Lewis that it seems it may have actually happened once. And we join in hope that we can commit ourselves to work for the renewal and resurrection of the Earth itself.

The closing chant is this Buddhist blessing . . .

[All]

*May all beings be well.
May all beings be happy.
Peace. Peace. Peace.*

[END]

Sources

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