

The Star Within

A Service for Ash Wednesday

Preparation before the Service: Ashes, Glitter (glitter make-up works), Paper stars large enough to write a short message with string or yarn hangers. Ready-made stars are available at teacher supply stores. Pens or pencils. A small tree or branch suitable for hanging paper stars (We used a Ficus tree). Place stars, pens and pencils in the pews so they are ready for use.

Welcome! Thank you for beginning the season of Lent with us tonight.

By renewing our deep connection with the natural environment, may we be encouraged to spend the next 40 days mindfully aware of how our everyday actions affect our world.

Prelude

Call to Worship

Minister: The season of Lent calls us to journey along the edge,
To anticipate that final trip to Jerusalem.

Congregation: Lent calls us to the cutting edge,
When the wheat falls to the ground and new life comes forth.

Minister: Lent not only calls us to give up something, but also
Invites us to participate in the mystery of God-with-us.

Congregation: By your grace, call us from grief into gladness, despair into hope,
Estrangement into right relations with each other and with earth.

Opening Hymn “FOR THE BEAUTY OF THE EARTH” (NEW CENTURY HYMNAL #28)

Introduction to Readers Theater (minister):

The Lenten season is traditionally thought to be a time where we are reminded of Jesus' life and death. It is time of self-examination and penance. In many traditions it is a time when one thinks about what one can do without. This evening we are inviting you to begin this season of Lent in a new way, while maintaining the traditional themes.

We may begin by reflecting on our unity with all that is, by remembering that each of us is part of an immense and continuous creation, a creation which entails the entire universe. Although we humans are a vital part of this creation, we are by no means the center. Yet we know that all too often we imagine and act as if we were the center — as if everything were here for us, for us to use for our own purposes, even to use up.

And yet in our hearts we know that we live in and through a complex set of relationships, and that it is our responsibility, as it has been the responsibility of each generation that preceded ours, to bequeath a healthy, fruitful, and beautiful world to all who shall follow.

What does this understanding of connection and responsibility have to do with Lent?

- If we are open to allowing God to expose the places in our hearts that suffer from the illusion that we are separate and apart from creation,
- If we are willing to allow God to bring into the light those places where change is needed,

THEN this is the real work of Lent.

- The real work of Lent is *not* about generating false guilt or shame.
- The real work of Lent is *not* meant to beat us down or turn us against our selves.

The real work of Lent is to *renew our sense of connection*, thus restoring our dignity and calling us back to our selves, to a place where we acknowledge the invitation to choose life and our responsibility to act co-creatively with God.

With that introduction, I invite you to join me in the Reader's Theater printed in our bulletins. People to my right will be group one; people to the left, group two; and folks in the back five rows on both sides are group three. Please stand and face one another.

READERS THEATER

Group One: In the beginning, the energy of silence rested over an infinite horizon of pure nothingness.

Group Two: The silence lasted for billions of years, stretching across aeons that the human mind cannot even remotely comprehend.

Group Three: Out of the silence arose the first ripples of sound, vibrations of pure energy that ruptured the tranquil stillness as a single point of raw potential, bearing all matter, all dimension, all energy, and all time: exploding like a massive fireball.

All: It was the greatest explosion of all time!

Group Two: An irruption of infinite energy danced into being. It had a wild and joyful freedom about it, and like a dance it was richly endowed with coherence, elegance, and creativity.

Group Three: The universe continued to expand and cool until the first atoms came into being. The force of gravity joined the cosmic dance; atoms clustered into primordial galaxies.

Group One: Giant clouds of hydrogen and helium gases gathered into condensed masses, giving birth to stars!

Group Two: Generations of stars were born and died, born and died, and then our own star system, the solar system, was formed from a huge cloud of interstellar dust, enriched by the gifts of all those ancestral stars.

Group Three: Planet Earth condensed out of a cloud that was rich in a diversity of elements. Each atom of carbon, oxygen, silicon, calcium, and sodium had been given during the explosive death of ancient stars. These elements, this stuff of stars, included all the chemical elements necessary for the evolution of carbon-based life.

Group One: With the appearance of the first bacteria, the cosmic dance reached a more complex level of integration.

Group Two: Molecules clustered together to form living cells!

Group Three: Later came the algae, and then fishes began to inhabit the waters!

Group One: Thence the journey of life on land and in the sky. Insects, amphibians, birds, reptiles, and mammals: all flourished and diversified and elaborated the themes of life. And now it is our time, too.

All: This is our story.

Group Two: The story of our beginning, our cosmology.

Group Three: Humans were invited to care for the earth...

Group One: But often we tried to conquer and subdue it.

Group Two: We have poisoned our life-support systems of soil, water, and air with toxic waste.

Group Three: We have damaged our forests through clear-cutting and acid rain.

Group One: Our oceans, lakes, and streams are littered with plastic and laced with sewage.

Group Two: We are annihilating our companion creatures at a rapid rate.

Group Three: In a universal sense, this is our Calvary experience.

Group One: The onus is not on some divine, external agent who can reverse the destruction we humans have caused.

All: The burden is ours to own and bear.

Group Two: And so we begin our Lenten Journey this Ash Wednesday,

Group Three: with an open heart asking the Creator

Group One: to show us how to take the daily things of life and see them as sacred.

Group Two: May God guide us as we perform simple acts of love and prayer,

Group Three: and real works of reform and renewal.

Group One: Let us love deeply the earth which gives us air to breathe, water to drink, and food to sustain us.

Group Two: May we remember that life is begotten from stardust, radiant in light and heat.

Group Three: We are all one—all of creation, all that now live, all that have ever lived.

Group One: Remember we are stardust, and to stardust we return.

Group Two: Remember we are connected and to connection we return.

Group Three: Remember we are part of the great mystery.

All: Remember we are stardust and to stardust we return.

- **Lenten Reflections (by minister)**

Ash Wednesday begins a journey of turning back toward God. It is a day when we look at how self-centered our lives have become, when we acknowledge that we often fall short of what we want to be. It is a day when we call all of our angers, hatreds, and jealousies out from their dark corners and embrace them as part of us. Lent is also a season of healing. We open up our lives so that we may see into the depths of our souls. It is a time of confession. Traditionally, ashes were put upon our foreheads to symbolize our sorrow for what we have wrongly done. In this service we hope to transform the ashes into "stardust" so that the mark upon the forehead is not only a reminder of our need for forgiveness but also a reminder of our connection with earth and how we can be an instrument of healing.

- **The Tree of Hope and the Imposition of Star Dust**

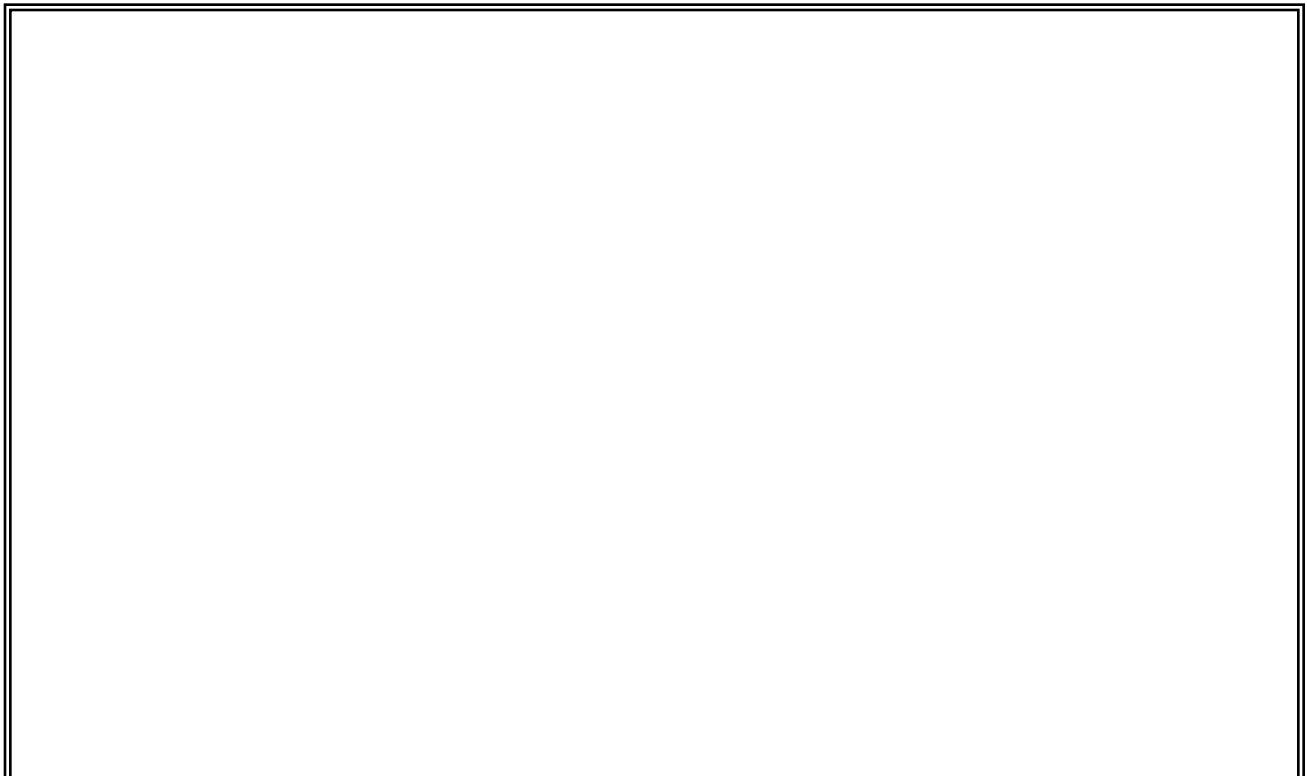
Minister: *[extemporaneously] invite congregants to reflect on not only what they may pledge to **give up** during Lent on behalf of the whole, their larger selves, but also what they may pledge **to do** in behalf of their communities, their bioregions, their planet. Direct their attention to the list that ends this sample bulletin. Allow time (and offer musical accompaniment) for attendees to meditatively, prayerfully choose one or more actions, and to write these on paper stars so provided.*

Then the ritual will begin: each will come forward and hang their star on The Tree of Hope, then receive stardust (glitter or traditional black ash, as either form truly is stardust) as they choose. The minister may say "Remember you are stardust, and to stardust you shall return" while placing the ashes/glitter on either the person's forehead or top of their hand.

Closing Hymn "O GOD OF STARS AND SUNLIGHT!" (SINGING THE LIVING TRADITION #11)

Benediction

Postlude



During Lent, let us be more mindful of how we live in partnership with the earth. Consider not only what you may choose to give up, but also what you may choose to do. This sample list of earth-friendly activities may give you some ideas. Then when Easter comes, we can truly celebrate the renewal of life:

1. Read a book about an animal. Become your family's expert on this creature and share the magic that you discover.
2. Make a wildlife or habitat map of your yard or neighborhood.
3. Set up a bird feeder.
4. Take care of houseplants. Learn how to water and fertilize them, and how to trim off dead leaves.
5. Recycle and reuse shopping bags or use a sturdy cloth bag when going to the supermarket.
6. Use natural light when possible.
7. Recycle clothes by passing them along to friends, family, or local thrift shops.
8. Avoid using Styrofoam containers and products.
9. Go on a walk and observe nature.
10. Go to a nursing home or talk to your grandparents about how the land has changed over the years. How has their relationship with the outdoors changed?
11. Visit a grocery store and talk about the food chain. What plant or animal died to provide your favorite foods? What died to provide food for your food?
12. Spend a clear evening counting falling stars.
13. Talk with farmers about the life and death cycle as it is seen on their farms.
14. Monitor the newspaper for articles on any new scars that were made on the earth. Create an album of newspaper clippings and look for patterns or trends.
15. Write a letter to a company or agency that is creating earth scars (a pesticide company for example). Cite the effects about which you are concerned and encourage corrective action.

from "More Teaching Kids to Love the Earth" by James Kasperson and Marina Lachecki, Pfeifer-Hamilton, Duluth, 1995.

THIS WORSHIP LEAFLET IS PRINTED ON 100% POST-CONSUMER FIBER RECYCLED PAPER.

NOTE: This Ash Wednesday evening service was created and performed in 2004 by Rev. Dr. Paula Lehman, Minister of Children, Youth and Families and Rev. Sarah Griffith, Minister of Outreach at:

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