

## 2009 Environmental Lenten Worship Series

# Optional Worship Service “A Tenebrae for the Earth”

by Kim Winchell (2009)

For use during Lent or at other times of the year, as a means for deeper reflection on the ongoing suffering of God’s creation.

### Introduction

This optional worship service draws upon the traditional *Tenebrae* format for seven readings, as is often used on Good Friday, marked by the successive diminishment of the light. In this usage, the extinguishing of each light is combined with a reading of one of “seven degradations of creation.” As we believe that Jesus Christ died to reconcile *all things*, we are invited here to reflect on how we, as Christ’s followers, are being urged by the Holy Spirit to respond in our day and time to the ongoing “Passion of the Earth.”

The concept of “Seven Degradations of Creation” (also sometimes used as an “Environmental Stations of the Cross”) was first developed by Dr. Calvin B. DeWitt in 1991 and used in many contexts since, including the Women of the ELCA conference *Caring for Creation: A Challenge for the Church*, held at Black Mountain, N. Carolina (Sept 1991). The core ideas have been revised and adapted for use here with the gracious permission of Dr. DeWitt.

### Planning & Preparation

You will need seven candles and something to represent the Earth – a globe or other visuals (projected slides of nature or degraded nature, for example), or a large “Earth Ball” ([www.earthball.com](http://www.earthball.com)). With a globe or similar “Earth Ball” in a central location up front, it is possible for readers of the “degradations” to place a handful of mud on the symbol for Earth after each reading. Plan which hymns and verses will be used between readings, if desired.

Use two or more readers and alternate for the “seven degradations.” Plan for the successive dimming of lights and/or extinguishing of candles; decide whether to use the optional prayer petitions included with each reading. If using a globe and mud, plan ahead for its placement and for the order of actions, i.e., the reading, the mud placed on the globe, the light or a candle extinguished, with a pause for silence before the next reading, and/or sing a verse or two of an appropriate hymn. Avoid printing all of this material for congregants; perhaps just list the “topics” of the seven degradations (saves paper *and* they are meant to be *heard*).

**Some suggested hymns** to intersperse with the seven readings:

ELW = *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (hymnal)

*When Pain of the World Surrounds Us* [ELW 704]

*Touch the Earth Lightly* [ELW 739]

*Rise Up, O Saints of God!* [ELW 669]

*What Wondrous Love is This* [ELW 666]

## Suggestions for an Order of Worship

### Prelude

Choose something quiet, perhaps some of the hymns that will be sung, and have the lights slightly dimmed. If possible, include a series of “reflection questions” on the back of the bulletin (or projected on a screen) and invite congregants to quietly consider these questions prior to worship or to take them home with them, after the service.

### Sample Questions for personal reflection:

Do I strive to live in closer harmony with the Earth and its creatures?  
What more can I do?

Have I heard God’s call to me, to be a better steward of creation?  
How can I be more open to hear God’s voice?

Am I actively involved in recognizing, enjoying, and preserving the ecological diversity of life?  
Do I “pay attention” and lovingly “behold” the creatures and plants in my area/bioregion?  
Do I share these experiences with others, especially children?  
What child could I join for a walk in the woods or field or natural history museum?

Do I avoid wasteful consumption and unneeded disposable, one-use items?  
How am I “using” creation?  
Am I mindful of my energy use and how it affects the increase in greenhouse gases (especially CO2) that are changing the Earth’s climate?  
Can I save more energy in my home or daily life? Could I drive less? Use alternative energy sources?  
Change more of my light bulbs to CFL’s (compact florescent lights)?

Do I try to learn about current environmental issues, in order to inform my own actions and to be able to communicate my concerns to my elected representatives?  
How can I learn more and be a part of advocacy efforts, to speak for those (including creation) who are voiceless or whose voice is not heard?

How have I “muddied” God’s beautiful Earth?

### **Welcome & Opening Words of Reflection** [*May be read by worship leader*]

The passion of our Lord Jesus Christ on the cross was a selfless act of life-giving love, to redeem a sinful humanity and to call us into fellowship, love, and communion with him. Through God’s grace, that has deep and life-changing meaning for all of us and for all of our churches. It *means something*, to be redeemed sinners and followers of Christ.

It means something about who we are, and for how we live our lives. And because of that, in every age, and given our specific time and place, the followers of Christ must ask themselves: “What does it mean to be faithful?” and “What actions ought to then flow from my faith?”

In Paul’s Letter to the Romans, we read (8:19) of a groaning creation, waiting “with eager longing, for the revealing of the children of God.” It is far past time for us to meet that eager longing. It is time for us to re-join, in sustainable, God-praising and healing ways, the “hymn of all creation.” We live at a most challenging time and place in our world today, a time of nearly unprecedented ecological and eco-justice challenges. It is a time in which our choices about how we live with and in the natural world, God’s creation, have huge implications for the health and quality of our lives, and for the lives of the generations to follow ours. Our choices also carry significant implications for

creation itself, which has its own value in God's eyes and yearns to add its own, full-bodied voice to that sacred hymn of praise that arises from all of creation.

During this time of solemn reflection, we will ponder the passion of our Lord as *joined to* the ongoing passion of creation. The format of our worship today follows the pattern of a traditional *Tenebrae* service, where a series of seven reflections are each followed by a diminishment of the light. Those reflections are traditionally built upon the 7 last words of Christ, before he died. The seven reflections we use here will lift up the *ongoing* suffering of the Body of Christ on Earth – both within God's people and God's created world.

As we acknowledge and ponder the passion of the Earth, the passion of God's creation, let us look deeply into our hearts and prayerfully ask ourselves:

In what ways do we deny (like Peter) that we even ARE followers of Christ, when we look away from or deny the degradation of creation, which God so loves? In what ways do we continue to add to the wounds and suffering of Christ, in the ways we treat one another and this precious Earth? How are we, through our action or inaction, contributing to the degradation of God's beloved creation?

Let us join together in a prayer of sorrow:

**A Prayer of Sorrow** [*responsive litany*]

\*Adapted from UN Environmental Programme's *Only One Earth* (1990)

L: We have forgotten who we are

R: **We have forgotten who we are**

L: 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.

R: **We have forgotten who we are**

L: 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.

R: **We have forgotten who we are**

L: Now the land is barren

And the waters are poisoned

And the air is polluted

And the climate is changing.

R: **We have forgotten who we are**

L: Now the forests are dying

And the creatures are disappearing

And the humans are despairing.

R: **We have forgotten who we are**

L: We ask forgiveness

We ask for the gift of remembering

We ask for the strength to change.

R: **We have forgotten who we are**

*Pause for a moment of silent reflection*

**Hearing God's Word** *[optional]*

L: People of God, hear the teachings of God's Holy Word to us this day:

**Note:** Here, a collection of scriptures may be read, with a series of readers, if desired, and without citing chapter/verse (texts should be listed in bulletin). These texts are meant to be simply heard, as the "flow" of God's Word to us this day. Consider the following collection: Ps 24:1; Gen 2:15; Ps 8:1,3-4,6; Deut 30:19; Rom 8:19,22; Col 1:15,19-20; John 3:16-17; 2 Cor 5:17-19

L: The Word of the LORD.

R: **Thanks be to God.**

**The Passion of the Earth: "Seven Degradations of Creation"**

L: People of God, let us prepare to hear the passion of God's Earth.

May our hearts be opened to the groaning of creation and to God's Holy Spirit, urging us to respond.

[Sing verse 1 of *When Pain of the World Surrounds Us*]

**Degradation of the Land**

*The Lord spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai, saying:  
Speak to the people of Israel and say to them: When you enter the land  
that I am giving you, the land shall observe a sabbath for the Lord.*

-- Leviticus 25:1-2

We have pressed creation relentlessly. The land itself has little sabbath time. We have dredged up, we have paved over, we have built up, we have cut and burned down. The land loses its fruitfulness; life-sustaining ecosystems are degraded or destroyed. The land never rests; the creatures and birds are driven off. The homes of the creatures of wetlands, forests, grasslands, and rain forests – have become parking lots, chemical deserts, suburbs with "starter castles," or cut over and burnt wastelands. 70% of people living in poverty rely on the land for their income and sustenance. As the land is destroyed, life is diminished – for humans, creatures, trees, flowers, birds, and the healthy, life-giving balance of ecosystems. Poor land use has destroyed habitat for countless creatures and destroyed beautiful wild places where humans may go to renew their spirits.

\*\* Mud is placed on globe; first light extinguished.

We humbly pray, Lord, for your forgiveness and for the wisdom to know how we could treat the land more gently. We pray for compassion to arise in the hearts of those who can help to heal and restore damaged landscapes and aid those who suffer because of it.

Lord, in your mercy: Hear our prayer.

[Sing verse 2 of *When Pain of the World Surrounds Us*]

**Global Toxicification**

*The earth lies polluted under its inhabitants; for they  
have transgressed laws, violated the statutes,  
broken the everlasting covenant.*

-- Isaiah 24:5

Humans have too often ignored the most basic law of the natural world: everything is inter-connected. When we dump toxic materials into the ground or water or air, they do not disappear – they contaminate and harm all living things and the clean soil, water, and air that all living things need for life, good health, and sustenance.

Most Americans have an average of at least 200 manmade chemicals stored in their bodies. Measurable amounts of toxic chemicals are found the world over, even in remote places like Antarctica and in wilderness lakes, because global wind patterns carry pollution to all corners of the world. Toxic materials buried in the ground can leak into water supplies, affecting humans and wildlife alike.

Those living in poverty, and the young, the old, and the weak, are typically the ones most harmed by pollution. They also often must live in the most polluted places and have little control over the contamination of their surroundings – the places they depend upon for basic needs of food, water, and shelter.

God's covenant is with all living things. Contaminating soil, air, or water does not fulfill our most basic commandments to serve and love God, and to love our neighbors as ourselves.

\*\* Mud is placed on globe; second light extinguished.

We humbly pray, O Lord, for forgiveness for the ways we have knowingly, or even unknowingly, polluted the air, soil, or water. We pray for the resolve to change our habits and for the courage to speak out for public policies that will ensure cleaner water, air, and soil. Lord, in your mercy: Hear our prayer.

[**Sing** verse 3 of *When Pain of the World Surrounds Us*]  
Degradation of the Oceans

*And God said, "Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures,  
and let birds fly above the earth across the dome of the sky."  
So God created the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves,  
of every kind, with which the waters swarm, and every winged bird of  
every kind. And God saw that it was good. God blessed them, saying,  
"Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters of the seas,  
and let birds multiply on the earth."*

-- Genesis 1:20-22

*Hear the word of the Lord, O people of Israel;  
for the Lord has an indictment against the inhabitants of the land.  
Therefore the land mourns, and all who live in it languish; together with the wild animals and the  
birds of the air, even the fish of the sea are perishing.*

-- Hosea 4:1a, 3

The Pacific Ocean now contains more plastic (from thrown away materials and containers) than plankton. Fish and other marine species the world over are in dramatic and serious decline, due to pollution, habitat destruction, too much commercial fishing (with huge nets that literally empty the ocean of species), uncontrolled hunting of marine mammals, and climate change.

Coral reefs, a critical habitat for myriads of species, are rapidly dying due to pollution, physical destruction (from boats and divers), and climate change. At current rates of destruction, it is estimated that 70% of coral reefs (and the species that live in them) may be gone by the year 2050. Poor people living on island nations often depend on fish as a primary source of food. They are finding it ever more difficult to feed their families, as fish stocks plummet.

\*\* Mud is placed on globe; third light extinguished.

We humbly pray to you, O Lord, for your forgiveness and for the renewal of the health of the oceans of the world, for the fish, the creatures, the coral reefs, and the peoples who need the bounty that only healthy oceans can supply.

Lord, in your mercy: Hear our prayer.

[Sing verse 1 of *Touch the Earth Lightly*]

### Extinction of Species

*O Lord, how manifold are your works!  
In wisdom you have made them all; the earth is full of your creatures.*  
-- Psalm 104:24

*Ah, you who join house to house, who add field to field,  
until there is room for no one but you, and you are left  
to live alone in the midst of the land!*  
-- Isaiah 5:8

Biodiversity is a term used to describe the quantity and variety of living species of plants and animals. It is a sign of healthy ecosystems, when biodiversity is high. Changes – and a marked decline – in biodiversity have been more rapid since about 1950, than at any other time in human history, and are expected to continue at the same rate (or even accelerate) with the pressures of: an ever increasing human population, ongoing habitat destruction, the impacts of climate change, and human-produced toxins released into the soil, air, and water.

The current rate of species extinction is about 50 to 100 higher than what would be considered a natural rate. Scientists say that the world has not seen such a high rate of extinction since the time of the dinosaurs.

Most of these current extinctions have been caused by human activity.

What kind of world will our children and grandchildren know? Will their main experience of God's amazing variety of creatures come only from zoos and television shows? Will they "live alone in the midst of the land"?

\*\* Mud is placed on globe; fourth light extinguished.

We humbly pray to you, O Lord, for your forgiveness for the ways we humans have carelessly harmed your creatures. We pray that we will learn to manage natural areas with more compassion and justice for the creatures, birds, and growing things that live there, so that our "intrusions" into nature will be undertaken in more gentle and respectful ways. May we remember that you love and take delight in all that you have created. Teach us to more faithfully love, cherish, and protect the creatures

and plant species of your Earth and the astounding “manifold works” which you brought forth in wisdom, creativity, and love.

Lord, in your mercy: Hear our prayer.

[Sing verse 2 of *Touch the Earth Lightly*]

### Degradation of Fresh Water

*When you drink of clear water, must you foul the rest with your feet?*

-- Ezekiel 34:18b

*[Jesus said] “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.”*

-- John 3:5

Spiritually, biologically, simply, and critically – water is life. We are “made new” through the water of our Baptism and given the promise of eternal life. During our life on Earth, water – clean water – is absolutely essential to health and life.

Over a billion people today lack access to safe drinking water. Scientists warn us that this number will likely continue to increase, due to pollution, drought, and the draining of underground aquifers. Climate change is also increasing the incidence of drought and lowering the levels of freshwater lakes.

Those living in poverty, and especially women and children, suffer greatly from the lack of clean or adequate water supplies. In many developed countries, like the U.S., water is too often wasted without a second thought.

Water is also bottled at ever-increasing rates, as a high-priced commodity. Those millions of plastic bottles require oil in their production and most often end up as litter and trash.

Water means life. It is precious. We must become better stewards of God’s gift of water, so that people the world over may live.

\*\* Mud is placed on globe; fifth light extinguished.

We humbly pray to you, O Lord, for forgiveness and a deeper awareness of the importance of clean water, so that we will do all that we can to conserve water and avoid activities that lead to the contamination of water. And we pray for all the people around the world, who are suffering from the lack of basic, clean drinking water, that solutions and helping hands will come to their aid. Lord, in your mercy: Hear our prayer.

[Sing verses 3 & 4 of *Touch the Earth Lightly*]

### Global Climate Change & Air Pollution

*The earth dries up and withers, the world languishes  
and withers; the heavens languish together with the earth.*  
-- Isaiah 24:4

*How long will the land mourn, and the grass of every field wither?*  
-- Jeremiah 12:4

Climate change (global warming) presents one of the biggest environmental challenges that the human community has ever faced. Impacts are already being recorded and felt in many ways: melting glaciers, rising ocean levels, declining species, increased extreme weather events - like stronger storms, increased flooding, and longer droughts. All of creation, human communities and plants, creatures, forests, and oceans are already, or likely will be, affected in harmful ways.

Among human communities, it is “the least of these” – the poor, the very young, the very old, and those living in large cities – who will suffer the most from increased respiratory and other diseases, water shortages, and more frequent deadly heat waves. Climate change, combined with air pollution, makes air in cities even more harmful – asthma cases and lung disease are on the rise.

Those who live on low-lying island nations (millions of people and many of them living in poverty) are especially at risk, as ocean levels rise. Without reliable weather cycles or normal growing seasons – too much rain or too much drought – crops fail and hunger increases, especially for the already desperately poor in many places of the world.

Much of the electricity used in the U.S. comes from the burning of coal, where it has often come from the Appalachian region, extracted by blasting off and removing the entire tops of mountains. This has caused extreme damage to the environment and harmed the local communities. And the burning of coal adds substantially to the carbon dioxide levels in our atmosphere. So do the miles we drive and fly.

We are paying for our too often wasteful energy use in more ways than the increasing dollars we spend. We are destroying God’s creation and neglecting the cause of justice for many suffering human communities.

\*\* Mud is placed on globe; sixth light extinguished.

We humbly and earnestly pray to you, O Lord, for forgiveness for what we have done. In response to your grace and guidance, may we learn to use energy more efficiently and in cleaner ways. Empower us to speak out to governmental leaders at all levels, urging them to address the problem of climate change, for the sake of all creation.

Lord, in your mercy: Hear our prayer.

[**Sing** verses 1&2 of *Rise Up, O Saints of God!*]  
Human Social & Cultural Degradation

*“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.”*  
-- Matthew 5:9

[*Jesus said*] *“I give you a new commandment, that you love one another.  
Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.”*  
-- John 13:34

*“For God so loved the whole world, that he gave his only son...”*  
-- John 3:16

So many of our brothers and sisters, in this country and around the world, live in extreme poverty. In too many places in the world, people go hungry, lack water or decent housing, and all too often lack peace, justice, mercy, and love.

All of these problems are compounded by ecological problems.

We have too often forgotten that we are connected, in a vast matrix of relationship, with all people and with all of creation.

There is, indeed, a web of life that has been graciously and wondrously fashioned by our Lord. What have we done to this web of relationship? How can we do better at loving our “neighbors” – near and far, human and other than human – as our Lord Jesus Christ commanded us to do?

It takes a healthy planet, to sustain healthy people. And creation, itself, is precious in God’s eyes. All that God made was blessed and pronounced good. How can we care for the Earth and one another, in ways that promote respect and dignity for all? How can we be peacemakers and build more harmony in our relationships with one another and with God’s creation?

\*\* Mud is placed on globe; final / seventh light extinguished.

Let us pray to the Lord: Holy Lord, make our eyes and our hearts more open to the needs of others, especially the hungry, the hurting, and the poor. Help us to see that in caring for the Earth, we are also caring for one another. And help us, O Lord, to live in ways that promote respect, compassion, justice, and peace for all people, and for all of your broken and yet beautiful creation. Lord, in your mercy: Hear our prayer.

[**Sing** verses 4&5 of *Rise Up, O Saints of God!*]

### **Closing Words of Reflection**

*For God so loved the world [the cosmos], that he gave his only begotten Son that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life. For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.*

[John 3:16-17]

How we have muddied our lives, the lives of others, and the beauty of God’s Earth!  
This world that God created and loves and pronounced good and very good.  
This world that our Lord Jesus came to and walked upon, teaching a new way of life:  
a way of justice, mercy, compassion, and peace.

This world into which Christ came, to restore the fullness of relationships – to reconcile – all things, whether in heaven or on Earth. This world into which Christ came to model the true abundance of life – not accumulation of material goods, but the storing up of love, peace, mercy, and justice in our relationships.

How often have we not loved our neighbors as ourselves?

And do we limit whom we call a neighbor?  
How often we have neglected justice!  
How often we have lacked compassion!  
How often we have not established peace for our fellow brothers and sisters  
or for all of creation!  
How often we have caused broken relationships, with one another and with all of creation!

How often, in our ignorance, apathy, arrogance and greed, we have continued to cause you pain, Lord Jesus, in the way we treat one another and all of creation.

O Lord, forgive us, for too often we DO know what we do.

Help us to change. Move our hearts. Speak to our hearts ... and stir up our spirits, so that we may more faithfully follow you and your call to love and serve God ... and to love and serve our neighbor ... and to love and care for your Earth, out of the deepest gratitude for all that you have done for us, especially as we remember your suffering for us, and for all of creation, upon your cross.

And let all God's people say: **Amen.**

Optional final Hymn – *What Wondrous Love is This* [ELW 666; LBW 385]

\*Congregants leave in silence

Kim Winchell, Jan 2009