

Unison Prayer of Invocation:

**Eternal God, creator of constellations and cucumbers, of walruses and wrens, mountains and minnows; who set the stars in space and planets on their courses; by your Word, seas found their place, and plants their form, and humans were made in your divine image. Breathe your Holy Spirit into us this day, that we may be filled with your grace and attentive to your living presence within us and around us. We ask it in the name of Jesus, Lord of all creation. Amen.**

\*Call to Worship: From Job, Psalms, Isaiah and Nehemiah

One: 'Ask the animals, and they will teach you;  
the birds of the air, and they will tell you;  
ask the plants of the earth, and they will teach you;  
and the fish of the sea will declare to you...  
In God's hand is the life of every living thing.

All: **O Lord, how manifold are your works!  
In wisdom you have made them all:  
the earth is full of your riches.**

One: God himself formed the earth and made it.

All: **You alone are the Lord.  
You made the heavens, even the highest heavens,  
and all their starry host,  
the earth and all that is on it,  
the seas and all that is in them.  
You give life to everything, and the multitudes of heaven worship you.**

\*Hymn *O How Glorious, Full of Wonder* #558 New Century Hymnal

Call to Confession:

The Greek Orthodox Patriarch Bartholomew wrote: "To commit a crime against the natural world is a sin. For humans to cause species to become extinct and to destroy the biological diversity of God's creation...for humans to degrade the integrity of Earth by causing changes in its climate, by stripping the Earth of its natural forests, or destroying its wetlands...for humans to contaminate the Earth's waters, its land, its air, and its life....these are sins." We know this is not God's intent for the world or for us. But it is so daunting. We know we need God's help. So let us use in prayer, first in silence and then together.

Silent Prayer of Confession

Unison Prayer of Confession and the Lord's Prayer:

**Holy and Wondrous God, we confess that we are too often inattentive to the wonder that surrounds us. We walk in miracles unaware. You have given into our safekeeping a world deserving of great care, but suffering. Guide us, inspire us, teach us, confirm in us a will to tend the earth, and mend it. We ask it in the name of Jesus, our risen Lord, and pray as he taught us: Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our**

**trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory forever. Amen.**

Words of Assurance:

The Text in John we know so well says, really, 'God so loved the cosmos—the whole created order—that God gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. 'Indeed, God did not send the Son into the cosmos to condemn the cosmos, but that the cosmos through him might be saved.' The healing work we are called to do for God's earth is daunting, but we are not alone. Paul the Apostle wrote: 'I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.' 'God did not send the Son into the cosmos to condemn the cosmos, but that through him we, and the whole creation, might be saved. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Scripture: Romans 8: 19-27: Our scripture is from Paul's letter to the Church in Rome, a Church he has not visited, but longs to. It is full of consolation in the face of present trials. It calls for courage, and hope, and confidence in God despite present trials. It's a good letter for our times.

Let us pray: Holy One, we turn toward your Word as plants turn toward the light, as roots grow toward water. We seek what we can only find in you. Nourish us in your Word. Let it take root in our hearts and bear fruit in our lives. We ask it trusting in your Grace. Amen.

Romans 8: 14-27

*The creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. Amen.*

Mediation: Not Ordinary Times

*The creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God—that's us, as we shall be when God's redeeming work in us is done. Meanwhile we also, groan in travail, in birth pangs, in effortful participation in the coming into being of God's intended redeemed cosmos.*

Paul is clear that we live in this suffering world, and suffer as part of it, but we live with hope, and with a sense of purpose. That's what he's trying to tell the persecuted Roman Church. He's writing in the time of Nero, Christians are being tortured and killed. Paul will get to Rome in not too long, in chains, and never leave. This Letter is his great opus. The list of lives this Letter has changed is long. It is deep, rich, complex, fervent. Paul is convinced, and aims to be convincing, that despite all appearances, God is just, and God's promises are trustworthy, and God will keep his covenant with all creation. And we who believe are part of God's unfolding plan for redeeming the world, Paul writes. Things may be so difficult, and feel so hopeless; we don't even know what to pray. That's all right Paul says, the Spirit intercedes for the saints, us again, with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit. When things are so difficult we don't where to turn or what to do, the Spirit guides the longings we haven't words to pray.

“Not Ordinary Times” is the name of an ecumenical emphasis from Pentecost to Advent, to do the deep praying for ourselves and for creation needed in our times. The Creation is groaning. Things are not as they should be. The planet is changing, rapidly and we know it. We hear it in the news of acid seas and melting ice sheets, we see it in the storms, we hear it in the silence of birds that used to be plentiful in our fields and woods.

We will have to answer before the God of all creation for our response to the times in which we live. At a deep level we know that. This is the moral imperative of our generation.

Gus Speth, VT Law School professor and naturalist wrote, “All we have to do to destroy the planet’s climate and biota and leave a ruined world to our children and grandchildren is to keep doing exactly what we are doing today... and the world in the latter part of the century won’t be fit to live in.”

(James Gustav Speth Red Sky at Morning xii and/or The Bridge at the Edge of the World x)

But faced with the need for change that big, I find myself thinking, “Nothing I can do is enough,” and I want to just give up. Everything concrete seems so insufficient to the need. Clearly what is called for is a change of perspective, a change of heart. And that is where prayer comes in. “Renew a right spirit within me, O God,” the Psalmist prayed. We don’t know how to pray as we ought. For what should we pray? For innovative energy, or disciplined conservation? For new wisdom, or more will to do the good we know?

“Not Ordinary Times” is a call to do deep thinking, and praying, and listening to the wisdom in creation, and the Word, and the Spirit. It’s a call to let the Spirit intercede for us, so that we can intercede for creation that is groaning in travail for something new to emerge; for our full revealing as children of God; in hope that the creation itself will be set free.

I find Paul’s Letter to the Church in Rome deeply encouraging. The New Interpreter’s Bible says, of this passage, “We need help to peer into the darkness ahead and to pray God’s future into existence.” (New Interpreter’s Bible X p.598) What is promised is that the Spirit’s intercedes within us when we find no words to express the sense of futility we feel, and our longing for life to be different, for ourselves to be different.” (NIB P.590)

We live in this difficult time. We live in a finite world, and we know it in ways earlier generations didn’t. I have come to think about this from a Stewardship perspective. There is not one of us who thinks we should spend out the church’s endowment for current needs. We know that this is an inheritance from generations past, that helps support us now and is crucial to the future of the church. But that is what we are doing with the Earth’s resources.

Earth is 4.5 billion years old, Francis Tapon, a naturalist, squeezed the history of the earth into one calendar year, to make the billions and millions of years easier to grasp.

(<http://francistapon.com/Travels/Continental-Divide-Trail/Earth-s-History-Compressed-in-One-Year>)

- If all of Earth’s history was one year, then it would be April before life began as single-celled organisms in warm coastal waters.
- It would be the middle of July, before the first plants made it to land.
- It’s the end of Sept, before dinosaurs are on the scene
- It’s not until October that mammals start to appear.
- December 31, the last day of earth’s year, comes with still no sign of humans.
- Finally, around noon, on the last day of Earth’s year, somewhere in Africa, hominids appear; and at quarter –to- midnight homo sapiens arrive on earth.
- At five minutes to midnight civilization begins.
- At 20 seconds to midnight, Columbus came to America.
- With 7 seconds to go in earth year Americans sign the Declaration of Independence.

All of the Industrial Age is in these last seconds of earth's life to date. We are using up our endowment of Earth's fossil fuels that have been built up over eons. The easy oil is gone, that's why the fossil fuel industry wants to drill in the arctic and in deep sea wells, or use tar sands. The easy to get coal is gone, that's why we have mountain top mining with its pollution and destruction. The glut of natural gas from fracking will last a nanosecond in earth's year—the polluted aquifers and earth quakes it causes will become prohibitive. We are spending out our children's inheritance, and in ways that will leave them vast costs. It's as if we spent down the church's endowment and still did no preventive maintenance.

Deep change is needed. And soon. If I didn't believe in God it would seem hopeless to me. But I believe with Paul that the sufferings of this present age will yield to good. I believe we will be changed as the times and the Spirit work on us, if we work to be faithful. Michel and I had thought we'd be rich. There was to be a big inheritance from Michael's family. But his parents outlived their assets, and to stretch them, for a few years, the income from a family trust went to support Michael's parents, but the taxes accrued to us, nearly \$30,000 a year. We went into debt to pay them, and are still paying them. We downsized. We don't go out much. We have one car. We don't vacation much except with family. Our life is still lavish by the standard of most of the world, or even most of Vermont. But out of the discipline forced on us, we have developed a life style that is sustainable in retirement—as many of you have done. And it's a good life.

I think as a human society, we are in the same kind of process. We cannot live the way we used to. We can't keep using the same fossil energy at the same rate, and polluting the seas and skies in the same way. It's not sustainable. We are accruing a debt that will need to be paid. A new way of living is needed. The way we have lived in the last few generations, is just a blip in earth's year. It is not our past, and it will not be our future. We are the generations that know we need to change the trajectory. These are not ordinary times.

But extraordinary things happen. We just don't yet know what they will be. They won't happen by magic. It will take deep listening, and responding to the wisdom of the earth and the scriptures and the Spirit. So I invite you into a season of prayer and contemplation; a season of trying to discern the future God intends for us and for all creation.

*Creation waits with eager longing for our revealing as children of God. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with eager anticipation. And in the meantime, in these hard times, the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought; but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And that is not a small thing. Amen.*

Call to Offering: Gandhi said, "There is force in the universe, which, if we permit it, will flow through us and produce miraculous results." Let us make our offerings with courage and hope; trusting that God can use our gifts to change the world. God can use us. It's happened before. For the work of this church, and the care of the world, our morning offerings will be received.

\*Hymn

*Sent Forth By God's Blessing*

#76 NCH

\*Benediction (from Earth Gospel: A Guide to Prayer for God's Creation, Upper Room Books)

*May you experience anew*

*God's great Yes to you and to creation—*

*And may the Yes set you free*

*to live and love abundantly*