

Order of Service –March 13, 2016
Lent and Positive Disintegration: Dying and Being Born Again

Musical Prelude

Greeting -- “We know too much, and too little.” --Ellen Bass

1st Hymn: How Great Thou Art, Green 8

Readings -- Joanna Macy, Positive Disintegration; John 12:24; John 3:7

2nd Hymn Christ Thou Word of God Once Spoken, Green 131

Joys and Concerns

Musical interlude

Prayer -- In our dying and our rising up, we reach for You.

3rd Hymn: I Am an Acorn, Green 242
(a children’s hymn and then the little ones leave)

Pastoral reflection or message

Silent worship

4th Hymn: Amazing Grace, Green 185

Closing -- May we know we are unfolding the way we should be.

Introductions/Announcements/Afterthoughts

Postlude

Greeting

Good Morning Friends. Today is the 4th Sunday of Lent. Next week is Palm Sunday. We celebrate Easter in two weeks.

Ellen Bass wrote in her poem *The World Has Need of You*, “*It’s a hard time to be human. We know too much, and too little.*” That seems true of humanity at this moment in time on planet earth. and it seems true of the whole Lenten experience, the Lenten story. We know enough to have an inkling of danger, and to know that between what we know and what we need to know there is a gap. That gap is where we are. The Lenten time. The time before, the time of gestation coming to an end, the time of dissolution, the dying time, and the birthing time.

Between what is and what will be, between what we are going to be and what we were, is who and what and how we love.

So let’s start with love: How Great Thou Art, Green 8.

Prayer

Holy One, God who knows us in our rising up and our lying down, in our dying and our birthing, God of All Change, God Who Changes Not -- hear us today. We pray interim prayers, waiting prayers, uncertain prayers, hope against hope prayers, prayers of unknowing. Sometimes it feels as if we are dying. Sometimes it feels as if there is something magnificent waiting to be born through us. Always it feels dangerous. Take our fear, Oh God. Hold us safe, Holy One Who Is God of both Peace and Power. You who soothes savagery and presides over Upheaval we need You, for we are small and sometimes our faith feels like the tiniest of seeds dropped and forgotten. We wait and we hope and we wonder, impatient for something big to happen, or filled to bursting with dread that it will. and the dark and the sun and rain and wind and the earth move and speak in tongues and we want to add our voices. We are on the brink of change. Be with us God in this waiting time, this in-between time, this season of Lent. In our dying and our rising up, we reach for You.

Benediction

Between what is and what will be, between what we are going to be and what we were, is who and what and how we love.

May we know we are unfolding the way we should be. May we know we are held in the palm of God's hand. May we know we are the seeds, we carry new life within us. May we hope against hope. May we have faith that in our dying, there is something beautiful being born.

Readings

Joanna Macy, positive disintegration

Dangers to their survival move living systems to evolve. When feedback tells them--and continues to tell them--that their old forms and behaviors have become dysfunctional, they respond by changing. They adapt to such challenges by seeking and incorporating more appropriate norms. They search for values and goals which allow them to navigate in more varied conditions, with wider connections. Since its norms are the system's internal code or organizing principle, this process...is a kind of temporary limbo. To the mind it can be very disorienting. Psychiatrist Kazimierz Dabrowski names it "positive disintegration." It can feel like dying. In periods of major cultural transition, the experience of positive disintegration is widespread. Such is the case now for us in this time of Great Turning. Everywhere anomalies appear: developments that don't fit our expectations, or in systems terms, that don't match previously programmed codes and constructs. Bereft of self-confidence and old coping strategies, we may feel that we and our world are falling apart. Sometimes we panic or shut down; sometimes in desperation we get mean and turn on each other.

It helps to recall that in the course of our planetary journey we have gone through positive disintegration countless times. The life living through us repeatedly died to old forms and old ways. We know this dying in the splitting of the stars, the cracking open of seeds in the soil, the relinquishment of gills and fins as we crawled onto dry land. Our evolution attests to this, and so does our present lifetime, as we learned to move beyond the safeties and dependencies of childhood. It is never easy. Some of the uglier aspects of human behavior today arise from fear of the wholesale changes we must now undergo. To let ourselves feel anguish and disorientation as we open our awareness to global suffering is a part of our spiritual ripening. Mystics speak of the "dark night of the soul." Brave enough to let go of accustomed assurances and allow old mental comforts and conformities to fall away, they stand naked to the unknown. They let processes which their minds could not encompass work through them. Out of darkness, the new is born.

John 12:24 Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.

John 3:7 Do not be astonished that I said to you, "You must be born again."

Message

This week, it was suddenly in the mid-seventies. And though it was beautiful, the air soft and balmy, the wind almost hot, the smell of the earth so full, the birds alive and singing, it was also drastically outside the norm. The climate data show that for the Northern Hemisphere, we appear to already have raised the mean temperature within arms reach of the 1.5 degrees Celsius rise that we agreed in the Paris Climate Talks was the outside limit for the survival of island nations.

Meanwhile, crocuses are coming up in our yard. Geese are flying home again in great formations across the sky, and it seemed like time to plant the peas. So down into the dark ground the seeds went on Wednesday, tucked in with a gentle pat and a whisper of good luck.

And now we wait, and something, we hope, will happen. A transformation. A positive disintegration. A falling away of the old seed, a crack, a rupture, and then, new little plants. New forms, new life. It's not guaranteed, of course. Many things could go wrong. Birds or animals could dig them up, or wait until the tender green sprouts appear and then munch them just as they're coming up. Or they could rot. Or there could be no discernible reason but they might just fail to germinate. It's chancy down there in the soil.

And so it is with us. It's chancy up here. Chancy because life is chancy, and chancy because we seem to be on a collective journey toward transformation as a planet and a species, and whether it's the kind of crucible that leads to the cross and then, behold! -- an empty tomb and new life, or just to a cross and a mute stone that we cannot roll away -- well, we have to walk through the desert to find out. There aren't any shortcuts through Lent. Whatever way you look at it, it's 40 days, and 40 nights. And ahead there is the cross to carry to Calvary, the death vigil, the waiting tomb.

Of course we know the story. The stone will be rolled away. The dying will become a kind of birthing, the tomb a kind of womb, the death throes will be vanquished, new life will rise again from the ashes of our sorrow and our endless longing to believe that the impossible is possible, that transformation is within our reach.

But first. First there is the journey to the cross. First comes the labor, the work of

dying. Midwifing new life calls first to attention to what is dying.

For some Christians, Lent begins ceremonially on Ash Wednesday, when they are marked with a cross of ashes on their foreheads, and a whisper “Dust thou art, and to dust thou shalt return.” It is a tender honesty, if it can be said and heard with love. It is true. Ashes are dust and dust is soil, humus: humanity and humility come from the same root, the Latin, for soil. To put on ashes, literally or metaphorically, is to say with intention that this is a time of waiting in the dark, a penitential mode, that this is not “ordinary time,” that we are not in a season of celebration, we are grieving some of the things we have done and lost, that some important work is going on silently inside us, and that we are in the cinders of a dead fire, waiting for a fuller day of life to dawn again. Waiting to be born again, walking through the time of dead coals, the ashes, the soil of our origin and end.

Every so often, says the wisdom of the liturgical year, we must make a journey of descent, be smudged, lose our lustre, and wait while the ashes do their work. We must sit with humility in the soil, waiting, for death and, we hope -- though we do not know for sure -- for new life.

At a certain point, the spiritual life and the communal, biological animal life involves the willingness to undergo death. Death of former dreams, death of former selves and identities, death of previous understandings as new ones are forged, the death of possibilities as decisions are sharpened and clarified and new paths forward emerge, forever precluding the old ones, the old ways. And sometimes, after that terrible and painful dying away, after the seed’s husk sloughs off, a tender new shoot appears. Not always, but often enough that we labor in love and faith. Often enough that we keep going, we stay with it, the time of disintegration and loss, though the cross is heavy, and the way is hard.

The metaphor of rebirth, being born of the Spirit, being born again, is an image of radical transformation. An old life has been left behind, and a new life has begun. And there is a depth to this symbol -- it can describe inward, individual spiritual transformation, and it can simultaneously describe the transformation of the outer world, for those who are born of the Spirit of God, like Jesus, share God's passion for a more just and peaceful world. Transformed people create ripples.

Transformation spreads, like Good News. It comes up inevitably against the old guard, the centurions and agents of the empire, and there is a sharp clash between the old and the new, between what's always been so and what could be so.

If only we could have Easter without Lent! If only we could have the resurrection without the crucifixion! Of course, we want that, only that: spring without winter, life without death, reunion without separation, resurrection without the crucifixion. But here we are, in the dying time. The time of Great Turning, a Cosmic Repentance, the Metanoia of All the Ages. The path we are on will forcefully show us the world as it is. The tomb and the cross will tell us something terribly true about life on earth.

They will not, however, proclaim the *only* thing that is true about life on earth. Because Lent *does* end in Easter. Because after the cross *is* the resurrection. Because the tomb becomes the place where life *is renewed*, a scouring alchemy of loss and love. Death *will lead us* once again, to new life.

If the cross tells us something terribly true about life on Earth, then resurrection tells us something incredibly true. Resurrection is incredible -- it is hard to believe. The crucifixion is so horrific, after all. It is enough to shatter all faith.

It is work to believe that the pain of death is not the final say. It is *work* to believe that the forces and powers of greed and empire and violence and destruction are not ultimate. It is *work* to believe that dying is, like birthing, a labor of love.

And that maybe, just maybe, we *must* die before something can be born again.