

Celebration of Beginings and Endings

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Death has been our companion for as long as we have been human.
Knowing that we had a beginning and that we would have an end,
knowing that there was a time when we were not,
that there would come a time when we would have ceased to be,
this is the knowledge of the gods,
the fruit of the tree of knowledge,
the insight which separated us from our fellow creatures,
from all that crawls and creeps and swims and flies
across the face of this fecund planet.
It was the knowledge of our own death
which ripped us from the nest of innocence,
which stood us naked and responsible in the universe,
the only part of existence to know its own finitude,
to reflect upon its being,
to contemplate its own end,
to conceive a world in which it had no part.

Driven by that knowledge,
we have created the definitive works of our species--
complex civilizations,
intricate works of art,
cities and towns and villages,
and religious speculations of incredible variety--
all designed to repeaL the sentence,
to defeat death,
to enter than infinitude
which is the logical necessity
if we be finite.
Gods we have cobbled together
compounded of hope and fear
and the tenuous speculation
that death may be an entry into another world,
not the end it seems,
but a passage,
a means to not be and yet still be,
to leave the world but to affect the world.

Driven by the knowledge

that we must die,
we sometimes embrace madness.
Unable to elude death,
some have enlisted in its service.
Angels of destruction we become;
betrayed by self-knowledge ,
we become the enemies of life,
sowing death and despair
athwart the planet.
We natter on
of megacorpuses and acceptable deaths;
We murder friends and strangers alike
For what they have done and for what they have not done,
And for who they are or are not,
And for no reason at all.

Through it all,
sane or mad,
hoping or despairing,
we know death stands by our shoulder
mirroring to us our unique humanity.
When we have the courage to look full in the face of death,
then we discover who and what we are:
That single living form which because of the knowledge of death
has invented meaning and purpose and direction.
Then we learn that death does not ask us to serve it,
does not ask us to be the enemies of life.
Death waits quietly to gather us in peace unto itself
when life has used us up.

This morning,
with the old year dying
and a new year waiting to be born in cold and darkness,
we gather to celebrate our endings and our beginnings,
and to find a place in our own lives for death,
so that we need neither flee it, nor fear it, nor serve it,
but learn to live richly with its dark realities.

How many millions have died this year
no one can count.
A thousand different ways death has overtaken them.
Some have been surprised--
In youth and hope and promise
they have been cut down.
Some have been gathered in the fullness of years,
Rich in honor, surrounded by love,

worn out in the using of life.
Some have been the victims of violence, brutality, hatred, carelessness.
Some have been casualties of their own passions.
Many more have been culled by the earth,
gathered in by drought, disease, famine, earthquake and storm.
Some have died in anger and pain;
some have found death a gentle release.

Most of us have known someone this by-gone year
whose life has ended.
Today we celebrate their lives,
their successes and their failures,
their victories and their defeats,
their magnificence and their meanness.
We mourn them, and in them, ourselves,
and we pray them eternal rest.
For those who died too soon,
victims of hatred, violence, thoughtlessness,
casualties of a world which has yet to embrace its universalist destiny,
we mourn and repent,
and seek the vision and courage
to change the world,
to serve life
so that death become live's welcome servant,
not its bitter adversary.

In memory of those who have died,
we light these candles:

First, for those who over the years have been members of this congregation and who have died this past year, we light a candle.

We remember: Francis Rowand
Perry Kavanagh
Martha pugh
Bessie Keyser
Elizabeth Alpert
Alfred McClung Less
Louise Bush
Francis Hunter Whitaker

Second for those who were relatives of our members and friends, and who have died during this past year, we light a candle. (Will those who have lost a relative during the past twelve months please stand, and if you wish, speak the name of your family member in this holy place.)

Third, for all our brothers and sisters across the globe who have died this year, we light a candle. (Will the rest of the congregation please stand and remain standing through the hymn.)

HYMN: DARK HILLS AT EVENING.

If death has been our constant companion
from the very beginning,
birth has been our hope.
In each child born out of the womb of time and space,
product of the seed of woman and man,
we have dared see a promise--
that the past is not prescriptive,
that history is not destiny,
that the errors and follies of the past
need not be repeated in endless procession.

We greet each child
as a bond between past and future,
as a reason to hope,
as a renewal of the covenant
between the human community and the world which gave us life.
We are reminded that ultimately we stand as children
before the immensity of the power which created us.
We are reminded that ultimately we stand as children
before the complexity of the world we have created for ourselves.
We are reminded that ultimately we stand as children
before the possibilities which stretch before us.

We greet each child
as a challenge and a reproach.
Each child is born into a world
shadowed by hatred, injustice, violence and want.
Each child receives as a birthday present
the legacy of our failures.
Each child has,
for shield and protection,
only the love and concern
of parents
and family
and friends
and community.
Each child born challenges us to accept as our own
responsibility for all the children of the earth.

How many have been born this year, we cannot say.

How many have coughed out their lives
before more than a few days had passed
we cannot say.
Nonetheless, this December morning,
as one year ends and a new year begins,
we greet the children of the human family;
we welcome you to this tired, troubled, beautiful, promising planet;
we extend to you the shield of our protection and concern;
we pledge to you our continued effort to bring to birth
a better world
wherein you may grow up healthy, strong, free;
wherein your children may someday laugh and sing.

In your honor, we light candles.

First, for the children born into our church family during this past year, we light a candle. (Will all those who have had a birth in their families during the past twelve months, please stand and if you wish, speak aloud the name of the new child in this place of hope.)

Second, for all the children born into the body of humanity this past twelve months, we light a candle. (Will the congregation please rise and repeat after me.)

They are all our children;
we are all their parents.

HYMN: CHILDREN OF TOMORROW

One year is dying.
One year is about to begin.
We belong to both,
To the old and the new.
Birth and death,
death and birth,
Out of the womb of the earth we come,
to stand briefly beneath the stars of the heavens,
to dream dreams,
to give birth to dreams
and to children,
to change the universe, however slightly, forever and always,
and then, to the earth we return,
partners forever in her eternal dance around the sun.

Like the candles we light,
our lives burn briefly,
but they glow with a power not rivaled

in all this vast sidereal universe.
In this time of beginnings and endings,
let us tend the light of hope and promise
making our lives a gift
for all time.

HYMN: NOW GIVE HEART'S ONWARD HABIT BRAVE INTENT