

A Litany for a Season of Ash and Oil - Overview

Stanley Hauerwas wrote that one of the church's fundamental tasks is to create people capable of experiencing what is radically new, people "capable of being challenged by the story of Jesus and God's kingdom." (*The Peaceable Kingdom*, 1983, p. 108). Liturgy plays a central role in that task (at least when it is driven by the passion and vision of Jesus' ministry). In the face of our climate crisis, liturgy must help us not only to hear the good news, but also to hear the bad news, because only as we face the depth of our present crisis can we respond authentically to *this* moment.

This Call to Worship / Litany supports the United Church of Christ (UCC) Council on Climate Justice "[Kairos Call to Action](http://www.ucc.org/a_kairos_call_to_action)" (www.ucc.org/a_kairos_call_to_action). It draws on images from both the *Kairos* Call and the lectionary texts, placing Ash Wednesday within the context of Climate Crisis—and vice versa. Note that while one version makes explicit reference to the UCC "*Kairos* Call to Action," an ecumenical version features **alternate opening words for the Leader** making the litany appropriate for use in any Christian church.

The images drawn from Joel 2:1-2, 12-17; Isaiah 58:1-12; and Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21 are from the assigned lectionary readings for Ash Wednesday, Year A, Revised Common Lectionary.

Abraham uses "**dust and ashes**" (Genesis 18:27) to express his humble human state. It serves the same purpose in the litany. "Dust" also occurs in the words of curse spoken in the fall story (Genesis 3:19)—but, though many might assume so, we were *not* "cursed" to *be* dust. It seems *imperative* today that we see our finitude—the fact that we die and return to dust—as falling *within* God's good intentions rather than being due to some primal sin. Indeed, our habit of seeing ourselves separate from creation—now amplified by industry, technology, and ad-stoked consumption—is a primary driver of both climate crisis and social inequality.

The Season of Oil image aims to directly and unmistakably highlight this as a *kairos* moment. If we act well in *kairos* time, we seize it for promise rather than for peril. In these cases, *kairos* moments become *messianic moments*, moments in which humans place themselves in service as ones chosen by God. Such moments might rightly be seen as anointed, *oiled*.

Frequently, ashes are blended with oil for marking worshippers foreheads, so many Ash Wednesday services already include both ash and oil (although the oil is rarely mentioned). If the oil is explicitly acknowledged, one might choose to employ a single anointing. However, given the dire urgency of the moment, one could *with good liturgical-theological reason* choose to employ a double-marking (at two stations) to emphasize the additional depth of this as a *kairos* moment.

If done as ashes blended with oil, these or similar words (which shift the focus slightly from personal penitence to global solidarity) might be used:

"Remember that you are marked by both ash and oil—at one with all the Earth, and bearer of God's image."

If done as two separate markings, these or similar words might be used:

"Remember that you are ash and dust—at one with all the Earth."

"Know that you are marked by oil to bear God's image and hope in this moment."

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UCC Version

A Litany for a Season of Ash and Oil

Ldr: As we begin our Lenten journey this year, we join with fellow Christians who have walked this season before us for over a thousand years. This 2020 Lenten journey moves once again through that same season—reminding us of our own mortality and our complicity in the world's brokenness. *It is a Season of Ash.*

But *this* 2020 Lenten journey is also *unlike* earlier Lenten seasons. Recently our national UCC Council on Climate Justice declared this present moment a *kairos* moment, using a biblical word for time that indicates time that it is *overflowing with both peril and promise*. Think of it as a God-charged moment, one *anointed* with possibility for persons of faith. The Council has called on churches, beginning in 2020, to develop ten-year plans for mobilization responding to the intertwined brokenness seen in our worsening climate crisis and deepening social inequality. *So this is also a Season of Oil.*

Please join me in our opening litany.

Ldr: We confess that, like Abraham and Sarah, we are but dust and ashes. (Genesis 18:27)

All: And yet we are grateful to be dust that breathes, ashes that live, even though our days are numbered.

Ldr: As we enter Lent we hear the trumpet sounding its alarm, announcing the day of the Lord and calling us to rend our hearts. (Joel 2:1,13)

All: In this season of lengthening days, let *us* return at length to the One who waits for us, who is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. (Joel 2:13)

Ldr: In the prophet Isaiah we hear the God who is still speaking ask, Is not this the fast I choose? To undo injustice, to break oppression, and to recognize all who are in need as your own kin. (Isaiah 58:6-7)

All: And we acknowledge that we are entangled, both by personal impulses and by societal forces that invite us to disregard the needs of the world today.

Ldr: We hear the cries of the poor and the migrant, of family farmers and communities of color, even as the rhetoric around us seeks to pit one child of God against another.

All: But now, O Loving Creator of all that is, remind us that it is through deeds of compassion and in communities of love that light breaks forth like the dawn. (Isaiah 58:8)

Ldr: We hear—in the voices of scientists, in the screams of wildfires and extreme weather, and in the quieter anguish of dying animals and ecosystems—the pleading cry of a planet whose peril is more real today than at any moment since humans have walked the Earth.

All: And we, who are but dust and ashes—we are *also* ones made in your image. And perhaps we were born for just such a time as this. (Esther 4:14)

Ldr: O Liberating God, break the spell that tells us we are separate from the Earth. Teach us the truth that *by grace* you created us out of dust and ashes. And anoint us in this *kairos* moment to be your church.

All: Let us be marked by ash—made one, like Jesus, with all the precarious Earth. And anointed by oil—to act, alongside Jesus, with urgency and compassion for our human siblings and the whole of creation.

Ldr: During this Season of Ash and Oil, may we make humility, solidarity, and action for justice the treasure we store up. For where our treasure is, there will our hearts be also. (Mt. 6:21)

All: AMEN.

Ecumenical version

A Litany for a Season of Ash and Oil

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But *this* 2020 Lenten journey is also *unlike* earlier Lenten seasons. Because of the intertwined brokenness seen in our worsening climate crisis and deepening social inequality, some have suggested this present moment is a *kairos* moment, using a biblical word for time that indicates time that it is *overfull with both peril and promise*. Think of it as a God-charged moment, one *anointed* with possibility for persons of faith. *So this is also a Season of Oil.*

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