

Online Resource - Lenten Reflections

The Grace of Earth

GOD REVEALING, GOD INSPIRING, GOD CHALLENGING

"Our Earth is talking to us and we must listen to it and decipher its message if we want to survive" Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, 2007

Introduction

Lent is a season of prayer and reflection to turn back to God. We reflect on the Gospel to remind us of God's gift of creation and Earth as mother of life. Six aspects of Earth's life support systems, each unique, are about life. They open us to new depths of the Gospel.

1. Atmosphere
2. Oceans
3. Fresh Water
4. Land
5. Plant Life
6. Animal Life

This resource explores these six Earth life support systems as ways of God revealing, God inspiring, God challenging. We meditate in wonder and thanksgiving at the beauty and complexity of Earth's eco-cycles. We reflect in sadness and outrage at our human abuse. We ask for forgiveness and decide on positive action for change.

The Earth is a prophet now. We must learn to listen to God revealed in life in all its forms and respond.

Scientists warn that Earth's life-support systems are reaching their limits. www.newscientist.com

Earth is full of amazing grace. We now know more about Earth's story, from the mind-boggling cosmic beginning of the universe to the present. It was Abbe Georges Lemaitre, a Belgian Catholic priest/cosmologist who discovered what is now known as the Big Bang theory. www.amnh.org

Before time began there was nothing and then 13.7 billion years ago there was a bursting forth of pure energy.

Expanding, it formed gaseous clouds. The lumpy parts became stars.

Expansion into greater complexity gave elements and solar systems were born.

Earth was one of these, a 'goldilocks' planet, not too hot and not too cold.
www.bighistoryproject.com

"The planet Earth is a single community bound together with interdependent relationships. No living being nourishes itself. Each component of the Earth community is immediately dependent on every other member of the community for the nourishment and assistance it needs for its own survival." Fr Thomas Berry cp

Our knowledge of this Big Story means we can read scripture with new eyes opened to "God with us" in and through Creation. *"Where were you when I laid the foundation of the Earth?" Job 38:4.*

We can wonder at the diversity of the face of God revealed in the depth and breadth of all the aspects of life. Many of these we are still to discover.

God seems to empower the Earth with the task of evolution when God says, *"Let the Earth bring forth..." (Genesis 1:11)*

If we learn how to listen better to the Earth, we can seize the opportunity to take a creative part in the next faith transition which incorporates the new evolutionary story.



Mandalas are circles which symbolise the human relationship with the universe. This image is from *The Creation Mandala*, a booklet about the story of the universe by Fr Vincent Busch, Columban missionary in Mindanao, Philippines. The details of the story are in the book. (See attached order form for mandalas that have been hand crafted by women from the Indigenous Subanen community).

During Lent:

1. **Create your own Creation Mandala using recycled or natural materials. Incorporate into Lenten prayer.**
2. **Compose an Earth poem in thanksgiving for one of Earth's life support systems.**

This resource can be used in conjunction with *The Stations of the Forests Australian version DVD*. www.columban.org.au



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Creation Mandalas

Order Form
Subanen Crafts

All products are hand crafted by the Subanen women in the Philippines.



#1. Creation Mandala Large **\$80.00 each**
Large (44cm) including book **inc postage**



#2. Creation Mandala Medium **\$55.00 each**
Medium (25cm) including book **inc postage**

Suggested size for class rooms



#3. Creation Mandala Small **\$40.00 each**
Small (16cm) including book **inc postage**

Subanen Crafts is a livelihood project for Subanen women who live in the rugged mountains of Northwest Mindanao in the Philippines. Their handicrafts focus on the Sacred Story of the Universe and the Wonders of Creation. This focus honors the deep spiritual bond that the Subanen People have with their habitat. Through the Subanen Crafts project Subanen women are able to produce, promote, and market their art and jewelry. With modest incomes from the sale of their crafts the Subanen women can provide decent food, basic education, and proper health care for their families.

For more information visit: www.subanencrafts.com



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MANDALA ORDER FORM

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YOUR DETAILS:

Name: _____

Address: _____

Suburb: _____ P/Code: _____

Email: _____

Please accept my: Credit Card (Fill in details below) Money Order Cheque

Please debit my VISA MASTERCARD

PRODUCT DETAILS:

NAME OF PRODUCT	#PC	QTY	AMOUNT
Creation Mandala Large	1		\$
Creation Mandala Medium	2		\$
Creation Mandala Small	3		\$

DONATION TO COLUMBAN MISSION \$

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TOTAL AMOUNT ENCLOSED \$

NAME ON CARD (PLEASE PRINT)

EXPIRY DATE
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The Grace of Atmosphere

GOD REVEALING, GOD INSPIRING, GOD CHALLENGING

"Our Earth is talking to us and we must listen to it and decipher its message if we want to survive" Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, 2007

Week 1 - Atmosphere

"It is written: One does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes forth from the mouth of God." Matt 4: 4

God Revealing.....

Getting to know Atmosphere

Earth's atmosphere formed 5 billion years ago. It is a dynamic mixture of nitrogen (78%), oxygen (21%), and other gases (1%) that surrounds Earth. These gases are mostly produced by living organisms. Atmosphere prevents the sun's dangerous rays from reaching Earth. Greenhouse gases keep Earth's surface at 15 degrees C average, instead of a frozen -18 degrees C. Oxygen within our atmosphere is essential for life. The clouds, with their accompanying lightning phenomenon and rainfall, play a critical role in supporting life on Earth.

www.teachertech.rice.edu

"We can think of the atmosphere as a silken cocoon, woven by life for its own protection and nourishment". Here On Earth, Tim Flannery.

Reflection

God's word is found in Scripture and it is also found in Creation.

"Who among all these does not know that the hand of the LORD has done this?" Job 12:9

Genesis 2 tells us that God blew the breath of life into Adam.

Earth's atmosphere is what we breathe. Every breath we take is a gift from God.

"One of the oldest words for (the activity of) God in the Hebrew scriptures is the word "Ruach" which also means breath."

John O'Donohue

What image do you have of the breath of life?

"In his hand is the life of every living thing and the breath of every human being."

Job 12: 9,10

Try to imagine the atmosphere protecting the Earth. What do you think of?

We pray in gratitude for the gift of the elements that together make up the atmosphere which makes our planet habitable, our home.



Image source: flickr by Stenly Lam

God Inspiring.....

Meditation

Canticle of the Sun:

"Praised be my Lord for our brother the wind, and for air and cloud, calms and all weather, by which you uphold in life all creatures." St Francis of Assisi

Visual effects in the atmosphere give us beautiful imagery which inspires mystics, poets, musicians and artists. Spend time in an open natural place outdoors. Look at the clouds, smell the air, feel the air on your skin, use all your senses.

Find a place to admire a sunrise or wonder at the behaviour of the weather and avail yourself of the breath of God. Praise God as St Francis of Assisi did.

God Challenging.....

Different temperatures at the poles and the equator create a wide range of weather north and south. Natural processes impact the atmosphere eg. volcanoes, biological decay, and dust storms. Since the beginning of the industrial revolution in the late 1700s, humans have been affecting the atmosphere through our actions to the point that we are bringing about actual climate change. www.windows2universe.org

"If you had a globe covered with a coat of varnish, the thickness of that varnish would be about the same as the thickness of the Earth's atmosphere compared to the Earth itself." This comparison makes it easier to understand that the atmosphere is vulnerable to the vast amounts of pollution we emit.

Find out why scientists at the Vatican say Earth is now entering a new geological era called the Anthropocene. Discuss with friends, family. www.casinapioiv.va

Australians contribute disproportionately more per capita to greenhouse gas emissions. We must reduce our greenhouse gas emissions for the sake of all life. www.unep.org

Responding to God's call

1. **Get involved in Catholic Earthcare's National Energy Efficiency Network project. www.catholicearthcare.org.au**
2. **Read 'Let The Son Shine'.**
3. **Write a "thank you letter" to the Vatican scientists, for their leadership.**
4. **Start your Creation Mandala.**



"And God saw that it was good." Gen 1



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The Grace of Oceans

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Week 2 - Oceans

Then from the cloud came a voice that said, *"This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him."*
Matt 17:5

God Revealing.....

Getting to know Oceans

Scientists think that oceans began soon after the origin of the Earth about 4.6 billion years ago. We are the watery planet with over 70% of the watery surface providing the largest habitat for life, including the oldest living organisms. The species which inhabit oceans are adapted to life in the water. Humans are not. The oceans contain the highest mountains and the deepest canyons in which are the minerals from which the Earth evolved. Oceans help regulate land temperature. Oceans are the largest and most important carbon sink. Though coral reefs are small in area, more than 90 per cent of marine species are directly or indirectly dependent on them.
www.savethesea.org

Reflection

In Matthew's Gospel, God's voice comes from a cloud, Pope Benedict XVI spoke about listening to what the Earth is telling us. The Earth is a prophet now.

Think about how interconnected the atmosphere (cloud), mountains (land) and oceans are.

What we do on land affects the oceans.

Where have you seen God revealed in the oceans?

"there was darkness over the deep and God's spirit hovered over the waters."
Gen 1: 1 (Jerusalem bible).

When we speak the language of ocean science we enter a mystery of nature, partly revealing but leaving much hidden.

How do you interpret Gen. Ch1 in the light of current scientific knowledge about creation and life?

We pray in gratitude for oceans where life on Earth began and where about eighty percent of life still exists. We pray for forgiveness for over-fishing.

God Inspiring.....

Meditation

"We are tied to the ocean. And when we go back to the sea, whether it is to sail or to watch – we are going back from whence we came..." John F. Kennedy

The ebb and flow of oceanic tides are a metaphor for the rhythms of life. Ocean currents are life-giving, generating life cycles around the Earth. Reflect on the mysteries of the deep: currents and corals, deep sea thermal vents, unusual creatures, nutrient flows nourishing small fish and great, mangrove fish nurseries and Antarctic krill to nourish the mother whale and her calf.

Watch the video "Midway".
www.midwayfilm.com

Reflect on the sentence: *"From a distant shore a call is sounding"*. What is the call?

God Challenging.....

The impact of climate change on the oceans is very serious: acid waters dissolving the shells of crustaceans, rising sea temperatures spawning stronger cyclones, the sea becoming an over-loaded nitrogen sink struggling to absorb atmospheric gases, pollution choking sea life, rising sea levels taking over the island nations of

Kiribati and Tuvalu. www.actionbioscience.org

Find out how your lifestyle contributes to these problems? Think about your plastic use, chemical use.



Image source: flickr by Oleg

Responding to God's call

1. Find out where your storm water goes and what impact you may have on keeping it pollution free.
2. Find a local program that removes pollution before it enters the ocean. Eg Take 3 www.take3.org.au



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The Grace of Fresh Water

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Week 3 - Fresh Water

"..Where then can you get this living water?" Jn 4: 11b

God Revealing.....

Getting to know Fresh Water

Fresh water is water that has less than 0.05% dissolved salts. It begins as rain. Most of Earth's fresh water is in the form of ice. Less than 1% of Earth's total water is available for our use. It may come from rivers, lakes, dams or from underground aquifers, all part of the water cycle. Water moves through the landscape and picks up materials, natural and man-made, shaping the landscape and forming ecosystems.

The singing Heart of the Earth, John Feehan.



Image source: E Lanyon

Reflection

"We forget that the water cycle and the life cycle are one." Jacques Cousteau, *underwater explorer*

Living in an arid country like Australia forces us to realise how dependent we are on life-giving water. By its nature, water carries multiple levels

of meaning. It is the fluid of birth. It is the element used to celebrate Baptism into Christ's community. The scriptures are full of water as life imagery: river, well, spring.

What scriptural image of water appeals to you? Why?



Image source: flickr by Fishing_1

God Inspiring.....

Meditation

Create a sacred space with a bowl of fresh water.

Read "In Praise of Water": ¹Let us bless the humility of water, ²Always willing to take the shape of whatever otherness holds it. ³The buoyancy of water, stronger than the deadening, downward drag of gravity. ⁴The innocence of water, flowing forth without thought of what awaits it. ⁵The refreshment of water, dissolving the crystals of thirst. Water, voice of grief, cry of love, in the flowing tear. ⁷Water, vehicle and idiom of all the inner voyaging that keeps us alive. ⁸Blessed be water, our first mother." Pat O'Donohue in *"The Four Elements"* by John O'Donohue.

Reflect on the essence of water within you.

"We thirst for water and we thirst for the living water in the inner well of the soul."
John O'Donohue

We pray in gratitude for living water as a life-giving gift from God. Help us conserve it for life.

God Challenging.....

Due to human activity one quarter of the world's river systems no longer reach the ocean for part of the year leading to water shortages, and loss of habitat. More underground aquifers are being used at a rate which will never be replaced by rain. Australia is a dry continent which must preserve its precious water. In our current economic system, water has become a commodity to be traded by the rich and powerful. Water quality is essential for the survival of all living species, human and non-human. Access to clean water is enshrined as a human right, yet 730 million people in the world do not have that access. www.unwater.org

"We need a renewed spirituality of water that recognises its centrality for all life."
The Gift of Water, Catholic Earthcare Australia.

Responding to God's call

1. **Consider your water use at school, home, work. Do you need to use quality water to flush the toilet, water the garden etc.**
2. **Find ways to be in solidarity with those in the world where fresh water will become more scarce, for example in Pakistan. www.columban.org.au**



"And God saw that it was good." Gen 1



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The Grace of Land

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Week 4 - Land

"He spat on the ground and made clay with the saliva, and put this over the eyes of the blind man." Jn 9:6

God Revealing.....

Getting to know Land

Land is Earth's thin rocky crust, much of which is beneath the ocean. It is rich in minerals and gases. Geologists and palaeontologists tell us its 3.8 billion year story. Tectonic plates formed and continue to reform continents. The interaction of plates, oceans, volcanoes and ice sheets formed soils to support plant life. Healthy soil is vital to eco-system functions, landscape regeneration, food production. It is in the soil that seeds germinate and grow. Soil is a carbon reserve with the carbon contained in humus, charcoal and roots. *Here On Earth, Tim Flannery, The Singing Heart of the World, John Feehan.*



Image source: iStock

Reflection

Having a sense of groundedness in the land helps connect us to God, the source of our being. The natural elements which are contained in the land are also in us. Aboriginal peoples know this. Jesus used the soil to bring sight to the blind man. **How can the soil bring sight to us?**

"We must never lose sight of how we have been created: from the earth and from the breath of God." Pope John Paul II, *On Social Concern 1987.*

All the parts that make up the land system: rock, soil, water, wind, sun, plant, animal, mineral, work in partnership and in co-operation. Fr Julian Tenison Woods, soil scientist observed this when he wrote, *"the ridges in which the trees are growing must have taken ages before they could give the depth of soil necessary to support such growth."*

Pope John Paul II used to kiss the ground of each country he visited.

Why do you think he did that?

God Inspiring.....

Meditation

Landscape is not just there. It took millennia to come here. Landscape is the firstborn of Creation. John O'Donohue

On Ash Wednesday, we are reminded ritually with the words, "Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return."

The landscape of rocks, hills, valleys, horizons inspires artists, musicians, mystics to express something of God. The Hebrew meaning of the word Adam is "earth creature".

Take a handful of soil. Focus on where it may have come from, how old it may be, what life may have lived in it in the past, is living there now, what it may give life to, what it needs to be healthy.

We pray in gratitude for the land, its soil and its microbes, its minerals, its landscape of mountains, valleys and gorges.

God Challenging.....

Like the prophets, the Earth is telling us of the consequences of our choices. People, particularly those living in cities have become disconnected from the land.

How can we reconnect with land?

Psalm 104:30 inspires hope: *"When you send forth your spirit, they are created; and you renew the face of the ground."* *The Gift of Water, Catholic Earthcare Australia.*



Image source: flickr by USDA NRCS South Dakota

Responding to God's call

1. **Find a plot of land to call yours. Observe what happens there. Connect with it. Learn from it.**
2. **Can you help replenish the soil?**

One way is to learn about compost. Some ecologists talk about ADAM, the qualities of good compost. (A - aliveness D - diversity A - aeration M - moisture).

www.soilsforlife.org.au



"And God saw that it was good."
Gen 1



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The Grace of Plant Life

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Week 5 - Plant Life

Mary was the one who had anointed the Lord with perfumed oil Jn 11:1-45

God Revealing.....

Getting to know Plant Life

Modern land plants are said to have evolved from algae about 500 to 600 million years ago. www.biomedcentral.com

Scientists don't know the number of plant species but they could be in the millions. In Australia, because of isolation, most are unique. Plants help regulate our climate, purify our water, provide medicines, help create rich soils and protect soil from erosion. Plant diversity is essential for healthy ecosystems. David Attenborough, science communicator, through technology, reveals how plants communicate using colour and heat, how they fight for survival and their complex relationships with every living thing. Plants live in communities, each one unique. Watch The Kingdom of Plants DVD of the ABC series by David Attenborough.

Reflection

"Scientists themselves readily admit that they do not fully understand the consequences of our many-faceted assault upon the interwoven fabric of atmosphere, water, land and life in all its biological diversity."

Prince Charles Charles, Prince of Wales Speech, 'Global Security Lecture' at Cambridge University (28 Apr 1993)

Thanks to the technological lenses of microscopes and time lapse cameras and to the discoveries by botanists, palaeontologists, and archaeologists, we are now able to see things previously hidden from human eyes. Following a week's immersion in The Burren, a national park in Ireland, Cathriona Russell said,

"We discovered that the flowers that we admire and cultivate are not really made for us. They are made for insects. And how we discovered that was by looking at flowers as an insect might – using a microscope." www.columban.org.au

By discovering more about plant life, we are opening ourselves to the possibilities of new ways of seeing. They may help us encounter God in a new way in the sacraments when we use the symbols made from plants: bread, wine, oil.

***"Ask the plants of the earth, they will teach you."* Job 12: 8**



Image source: flickr by Sids1

God Inspiring.....

Meditation

Experience the reality of plant life directly.

In the early morning, gather an Australian native flower such as a banksia or a grevillea and place it where you can look at it closely. Reflect on it as a whole flower, then notice its parts. Look into each of the parts. Why those parts. What do they do? How do they work together? Notice its various colours. Why those colours? Notice any tiny creatures in the flower. Why are they there? Shake the flower. Taste any nectar that drops off. What are its uses? What struggles might this flower have had to survive?

We pray in gratitude for the grace of God revealed in plants, in wonder for what we are yet to discover.

God Challenging.....

We are partners with God in creation in that we have a responsibility to respect its integrity, and care for it. Healthy ecosystems evolve over time. Human impact is now disrupting that time leading to loss of biodiversity. The loss or change of one species impacts on others. Weed infestation is a huge threat to established Australian plant life. National parks, set aside to preserve ecosystems are under threat. Bushcare and Landcare groups are doing excellent work in helping weed eradication but they are small in numbers. There is a great need for more helpers.

Responding to God's call

Help create a network of schools, parishes, religious congregations, households all over Australia which demonstrates our love of plant life by contributing in two ways:

1. ***Plant a food garden and/or a native garden.***
2. ***Join the local bushcare or landcare group. Contact your local council.***
3. ***How is your Creation Mandala looking?***



***"And God saw that it was good."* Gen 1**



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The Grace of Animal Life

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Week 6 - Animal Life

"Take and eat; this is my body."

Matt 26:26b

God Revealing.....

Getting to know Animals

Scientists have no clear idea of how many species - from algae to blue whales - live on earth. Estimates are up to 100 million of which only about 1.8 million have been named so far. Humans are but one of those species. Though the exact number is impossible to determine, an unprecedented mass extinction of life on Earth is occurring. Scientists estimate that between 150 and 200 species of life become extinct every 24 hours.

There have always been periods of extinction in the planet's history, but this episode is greater than anything the world has experienced for the past 65 million years – the greatest rate of extinction since the vanishing of the dinosaurs.

From Death to Life, Fr Sean McDonagh.

If the science tells us we come from the same source, the extinction of species is the extinction of another mode of divine presence
John Feehan and Thomas Berry

Reflection

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

What is the human relationship with others of the animal species?" Australian theologian, Fr Denis Edwards says that human beings, created in the image of God, can relate personally with God.

Jesus, the Word made flesh entered into the world, revealing to us the love God has for all life, all creatures. The divine Trinitarian relationship of God, Christ and Spirit in the created world fills us with wonder at this love. Jesus shows us the way to relate to all creatures, even the microscopic ones – with respect for their lives and their integrity. *Jesus and the Natural World, Fr Denis Edwards.*

***But ask the animals, and they will teach you;
the birds of the air, and they will tell you;***

Job 12: 7

How do you relate to animal life?



Image source: flickr by EpochCatcher

God Inspiring.....

Meditation

Reflect on the words of St Thomas Aquinas, *"In this life we cannot see God's substance, but know him only from creatures"*, *Summa Theologica, Part 1a, Section 13.*

Hold a "choose life" ceremony. Praise God, "Blessed are you Lord God of all creation".

Name some animal life - large and small.

We pray in gratitude for the diversity of animal life from bugs to elephants, from krill to whales, from eagle to wren. Help us to be more considerate of our fellow animal species.

Use your Creation Mandala.



Image source: flickr by EpochCatcher

God Challenging.....

We are part of the web of life. Many strands have already been broken. Help people encounter fellow creatures and through them experience God's creatures in a new way.

Responding to God's call

Many conservation groups are engaging people as citizen scientists to observe and monitor animal and plant life.

1. **Find out how you can get involved, even by using your backyard.**

Eg: www.gondwualink.org
www.npansw.org.au



"And God saw that it was good." Gen 1



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